Time Unfolded
Perry Anderson sums up the achievement of Anthony Powell
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Comparisons between works of art, Adorno maintained in *Minima Moralia*, are inevitably at once refused and demanded by them. That they may simply be incongruous he disregarded. Cases where parallels are as close as those between Proust and Powell lend 'the compulsion to evaluate' he thought so generally inescapable a particular force, requiring especial care. We are dealing with two great writers, one universally, the other marginally, acknowledged as such. Yet in at least a couple of respects that have traditionally been held central to the art of the novel, construction of plot and depiction of character, Powell unquestionably ranks far above Proust. How much does such an advantage matter? Novels that scant or defy plot have a long and distinguished history – Sterne in the 18th century, Goncharov in the 19th, Rilke in the early 20th, dozens thereafter. Starting later, effectively in the interwar period, major work dispensing with characters became a regular feature of the literary landscape, from *The Trial* to *La Nausée* onwards: Beckett, Borges, Gracq, Calvino and others. Proust, however, disavowed neither, innovating rather than abolishing them, as he saw it. As a claimant to both, he is subject to comparative judgment of what he made of them.

There his aura has been protected by the differing fortunes of plot and character in the history of modern criticism. For Russian Formalism, the most original school of literary theory of the past century, whose influence has also lasted longest, the action of any novel combined a story – *fabula* – and a plot, or *syuzhet*, study of whose variant relations in due course produced a technical discipline, narratology. Where did character fit into this structure? It was reduced to a set of functions supporting the narrative, on the model of Propp's taxonomy of folk tales, precursor of Lévi-Strauss's treatment of myths. Much intellectual water has flowed under the bridge since the time of the Formalists, but the theoretical hierarchy they introduced has remained; its most popular subsequent device perhaps Greimas's 'semiotic square', in which characters become so many 'actants' occupying six invariant positions in any given tale. 'For a long time now,' Alex Woloch writes in *The One v. the Many*, 'characterisation has been the bête noire of narratology, provoking either cursory dismissal, lingering uncertainty or vociferous argument.' Continuing poststructuralist and ongoing scientistic trends in literary theory, sworn foes otherwise, are both averse to it: for the first, tainted with the delusion of identity, for the second, recalcitrant to the progress of computability (when it comes to questions of evaluation, often also two sides of the same coin, equally petrified by it). Since Proust's handling of narrative, where he was a pioneer in the creative loosening of corsets, whatever the shortcomings of his execution of it, was superior to his treatment of character, where the rigidity of his preconceptions undermined what he took to be his discoveries, it is not illogical that he should in general have enjoyed a critical free pass where he was weakest.

Scholarship is one thing, readership another. Contrast in the reception of the two writers is not confined to the volume of academic literature about them, where the legendary overproduction of writing by the French about their national icons – there are three thousand books on de Gaulle, five times as many as on Churchill – needs to be taken into account. A more significant index is translation. On the centenary of *Du côté de chez Swann*, a colloquium could discuss translations of Proust into well over a dozen languages.1 To date, the 12 volumes of *A Dance* have appeared only in French and Spanish, though a German version will be completed this year; Italian and Finnish petered out after the fourth, Swedish after the second, Portuguese the first (Italian later picking up randomly again from the seventh to ninth). Rendering works the size and complexity of *A la recherche* and *A Dance* into another language is an expensive business, incurring costs requiring commensurate sales. Literary laurels and commercial success, though today ever less independent of each other, remain distinct. The thumbs-up of the market is clear: Proust's popularity is much greater.

At first sight, this may seem strange, given that Proust is in so many respects the less accessible of the two writers. But there is a sense in which the scale of his audience derives from the ambiguity of his achievement. For some of the limitations of his art, viewed intellectually or aesthetically, are also, looked at sociologically, among its attractions. Though set in a highly specialised and now distant milieu, *A la recherche* offers scenes of it reducible to readily available registers: satire of manners and ontology of passions, the one figuring as mask of the other. The satire requires no great depth of sophistication to grasp, answering to standard expectations of what an aristocracy past its prime would be like – pretension, snobbery, egoism, hypocrisy. Behind this local

diorama of frivolity and falsehood, however, lie ostensible truths of universal scope: laws of the heart and mind operative everywhere, abstract and absolute, secrets brought at last to light by art, unmediated access to which readers anywhere on earth can gain.

Proust was not, of course, the first novelist to issue such existential edicts, even if no one before had ever done so at such length. What sets his apart is a more general feature of his writing, which accounts for much of its appeal: modal reliance on hyperbole. The rule of his imaginary is exaggeration. Characters balloon into caricatures; psychological insight escalates to ontological lemma; metaphor – or more typically simile – lifts the banalities of everyday sense-data into a stratospheric poetry of colour and light. Detesting what he called realism, Proust wanted to outbid it, and in doing so won part of his acclaim. Larger than life is, after all, a term of praise. Hyperbole – the briefest glance around the society of the spectacle is a sufficient reminder – pays. So too, sex. Malcolm Bowie's 'enveloping category of categories', 'recklessly exceeding the requirements of the plot', is another reason for the allure of *A la recherche*. Novels governed by the dynamics of desire, naturally, pre-existed Proust – Laclos and Balzac each wrote a masterpiece. But no one had ever produced such saturated sexualisation of an entire fictional world, sensational not only in degree but in kind, as the most forbidden forms of desire – between men, between women, pleasure in inflicting cruelty, pleasure in receiving it – become as it were the ground-bass of all conventional forms. Much has been normalised since, but the frissons of that erotic expansion have not lost their zing at the till.

Finally, there is Proust's romanticism. Formed in the 19th century, drawing inspiration in different ways from Chateaubriand and Nerval, he was at home in the dramatic afflatus of the high romantic tradition, and its characteristic tropes – enchanted childhoods, nature dazes, unhappy loves, tormented souls, vanities of the world, consolations of art – of which so many would become, in degraded form, staples of the culture industry in the next century. Fond memory belonging to that repertoire, Proust gave his touch of magic to it: the madeleine (in due course convertible into an item for comestible tourism), along with the hyphenation of Illiers and Combray in the spirit of Disney, how-to kitsch and the rest of the postmodern paraphernalia around his name, to which Proustian scholars delight to allude with a complaisant wink.2 So too in moral sensibility, he gave his own expression to the inseparable couplet of the cynical and sentimental, perhaps the most common of all legacies of romanticism, from bohemian garrets to Hollywood studios.

In reproducing so many of these, Proust ensured that they would enter into his posthumous reception. But, of course, the heights of his art transcended them. The weaknesses of *A la recherche* that have supplied so many of its popular attractions were also among the prices of its greatness. Had Proust been less indifferent in his fiction to the existence of others, the scruples of the intellect, the flux of history, he could not have created the vaulting interior universe of sensuous perception and emotion, a subjectivity unbound and hitherto unimaginable, of *A la recherche*. Nor the language in which he created that universe, soaring above the restrictions of what it contained and, resisting all impatient access, leaving the intractable mark of genius on it, in more, and more unforgettable, images than any other novel ever written. Proust aimed at the sublime. His addiction to hyperbole could become a lame – on occasion even an absurd – striving for it: few passages in Western literature court ridicule with such success as the anthropomorphic apostrophe to hawthorn blossom in the second volume of *A la recherche*. But that at his finest – depicting and confronting death – he achieved the sublime, no reader of the passages describing the last days of his grandmother, or the final pages of the last volume, could doubt. That art could redeem death was its formal conclusion. Yet he could also concede that art was not itself immortal: it might survive a century or two, but along with the human race it would perish in the end, with the cooling of the earth. The ability to contemplate both ideas 'in a single encompassing gaze', as Bowie rightly observed, was the mark of a disinterested vision that 'only great artists can achieve'.

In all these respects, Powell offers a counterpoint. His world is not so immediately available across languages, because it is so much less abstract: not a set of universal propositions with a light topping of satire, but the representation of a particular society over time through a large number of carefully delineated individuals. He was very conscious of just how distinctive was the class structure and culture of the England he portrayed, and the specific problems these presented the novelist. While in the Ritz, the narrator of *A Dance* muses:

> Waiting for someone in a public place develops a sense of individual loneliness, so amongst all this pale pink and sage green furniture, under decorations of rich cream and dull gold, I felt myself cut off from the rest of the world. I began to brood on the complexity of writing a novel about English life, a subject difficult enough to

handle with authenticity even of a crudely naturalistic sort, even more to convey the inner truth of the things observed.

Remarking in an interview that 'Russians and Americans' and 'to a certain extent the French' could simply 'throw somebody onto the canvas', and 'everybody knows what they were talking about', Powell spelled out the problem as he saw it: in England, 'people have to be described much more, you do get these extraordinary variations.' The variations – a point underlined by the difference between the narrator and the acquaintance he is failing to meet, of the same age, university and profession as himself, which sets him thinking – are products not just of temperament, but of backgrounds, some understanding of which is essential for a sense of Powell's achievement.

The opening pages of *A la recherche* and of *A Dance* illustrate the questions of access each pose a first-time reader neither French nor English. Both start with a famous paragraph of notable beauty: depicting insomnia in Proust, snow descending on fire in Powell. The first-person singular occurs 15 times in Proust; in Powell, not once. All readers, anywhere, possess an 'I' and have experienced sleep or lack of it. No language besides English possesses a one-word equivalent of the kippers, cast on flames, that billow smoke into the wind as the 'grey, undecided' snowflakes drift down on them. In Proust the novel proceeds for the next forty pages to describe a scene from the narrator's childhood, peopled by his family. Every reader was once a child. In Powell, it moves to scenes in a boarding school, an institution few anywhere have ever attended, and of a kind that exists in no other country. In Proust, it is the syntax that tests the reader's curiosity and intelligence. In Powell, the society. A glance at what translators have made of his titles suggests how difficult that can be: *A Buyer's Market* reduced in French to the slop of *Les Mouvements du coeur*, *The Kindly Ones* to the bathos of *Les Braves Gens*. That last word in *A Question of Upbringing*? The renditions in Italian, Spanish, French, 'classe', 'formación', 'éducation' – the connotation escapes them all.

A further hurdle to reception at large is a question of style. Where Proust employs hyperbole, Powell characteristically chooses litotes, which has no comparable continuum of use across different cultural registers. No blockbuster can afford understatement. In *The Acceptance World*, the narrator connects the two impediments, a complicated class structure and a preference for low-decibel forms of expression, directly: 'Intricacies of social life make English habits unyielding to simplification, while understatement and irony – in which all classes of this island converse – upset the normal emphasis of reported speech.' Though litotes is as distinctive a feature of Powell's own writing, if not as pervasive, as hyperbole is of Proust's, he was aware of its dangers. After further thoughts on the question, the narrator's meditation ends: 'Understatement, too, had its own banality; for, skirting cheap romanticism, it could also encourage evasion of unpalatable facts.' No sense of the risks of overstatement is to be found in Proust.

Sex? *A Dance* gives full measure to the place of desire in human life. Powell credited James with 'forcing, almost single-handed, the English novel into the status of a work of art', but remarked that there he fell short; even *The Golden Bowl* was limited by a 'chronically inadequate understanding of sexual passion as an element in human motive'. No reader is likely to tax Powell's *Dance* with that limitation. Reversing national stereotypes, Isabelle Joyau, its French critic, notwithstanding her admiration for it, purses her lips at 'the abyss of carnality' portrayed in the 'sexual shuttles' of its characters. Such a view conspicuously misses its mark, relationships in *A Dance* ranging far beyond mere physical coupling. The erotic is an element in human motive, not its invariable dominant: there is none of the overdrive of *A la recherche*. Nor can it be understood simply as concupiscence. Based as it was on a lifelong fascination with others, Powell's grasp of the attachments between people was incomparably wider and deeper than Proust's fixation on the mechanisms and manias of jealousy. 'Few subjects are more fascinating than other people's sexual habits from the outside; the tangled threads of appetite, tenderness, convenience or some hope of gain.' The apposition defines the sentimental world of *A Dance*. It withholds the crowd appeal of the cattleya.

Then, too, there is Powell's consistent critique of romanticism. In a *TLS* editorial of 1951 – at the time, naturally, unsigned – on the occasion of a new edition of Mario Praz's *Romantic Agony*, after remarking that the antithesis of the classical and the romantic, however inexact and often expelled from critical vocabulary, always tended to return, he offered his own provisional descriptions of the terms: 'A certain directness of approach to

life and tradition – whatever the immediate technique – surely suggests classicism; while romanticism could perhaps be described as dealing in terms of "what life might be".' Tiresome and misleading as the couplet became when employed to excess, it remained of use. If it had been largely abandoned by literary criticism, he observed some years later, that was because 'we have all become so hopelessly steeped in romanticism that it is hard for anyone to imagine any other point of view': newspapers, films, posters, feuilletons had made its 'pervasive and protean' appeal 'part of our daily lives'. Formed at the moment of an intransigent modernism for which romanticism was anathema, never altogether losing his admiration for the 'luminous brutal prose, blocked-in with a painter's eye' of Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr*, Powell identified self-pity and sentimentality as besetting weaknesses of romanticism – traits he detected in many well-regarded writers: Wilde, Ford, Greene, West, even Joyce.

How did he square this dislike with his admiration for Proust? He often remarked – it was one of his most characteristic sayings – that with any writer of significance, even the greatest, you always had to put up with something. In the case of Proust, he wrote late on, alongside brilliant set pieces you had passages of an overpowering artificiality; dreadful longueurs in *Albertine disparue*; generalisations that often didn't make sense; virtually no difference in social scenes of 1900 and 1920. But 'the dazzling side of the novel makes up for a certain amount of dullish, even silly stuff.' There was nothing unusual in that. But how was his work to be classified? It had to be granted that there were strong romantic elements in Proust; his attitudes to love and friendship, art and history, not to speak of duchesses, spoke of them. But in the ruthless consistency of its philosophy, structure and development in handling these ingredients, *A la recherche* as a whole was essentially classical.3 It might be asked whether here the limits of a dichotomy to which Powell, with all due qualifications, typically held weren't reached. That he himself could not always sustain it can be seen in his debt to Fitzgerald, no Chateaubriand, but one who all the same approached everything in 'a spirit of pure romanticism'. In his own work, here is the way he finesses the purest romantic epiphany:

Would it be too explicit, too exaggerated, to say that when I set eyes on Isobel Tolland, I knew at once I should marry her? Something like that is the truth; certainly nearer the truth than merely to record those vague, inchoate sentiments of interest of which I was so immediately conscious. It was as if I had known her for many years already; enjoyed happiness with her and suffered sadness. I was conscious of that, as of another life, nostalgically remembered. Then, at that moment, to be compelled to go through all the paraphernalia of introduction, of 'getting to know' one another by means of the normal formalities of social life, seemed hardly worthwhile. We knew one another already; the future was determinate.

The lyrical high ends like this:

But what – it may reasonably be asked – what about the fact that only a short time before I had been desperately in love with Jean Duport; was still, indeed, not sure I had been wholly cured? Were the delights and agonies of all that to be tied up with a ribbon, and thrown into a drawer to be forgotten? What about the girls with whom I seemed to stand nightly in cinema queues? What, indeed?

'Aren't we going to be told who everyone is?' said Susan, looking around the room and smiling.

Effects like these have little in common with the ways of Swann or the beaches of Balbec; let alone celluloid derivatives.

Lastly, and in many ways most significantly for reception at large, there is a difference of generic weighting. In the fictional worlds of *A la recherche* and *A Dance*, as in that of Cao's *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, there is much that is comic. But the place of laughter in them is not the same. Many of Proust's social scenes, when not overdone, are famously entertaining; taking up close to a third of the novel, they are integral to its greatness, which without them would necessarily be a lesser, more monotone affair. The form of the comic thread that runs through it is satire, which is always an attack – derision of a particular target, in this case snobbery,

hypocrisy, pretension. In the enclosed world of the Jia-Zhen compound in Cao's novel, delightful comic elements abound; but more delicate in dialogue and situation, these take the form of wit. In Powell's work, by contrast, though there is both mockery and wit, it is comedy in a larger sense, neither instrumental nor incidental – of characters and careers, actions and emotions – that prevails.

Here, certainly, lies a good part of the reason for the restricted circulation of *A Dance*. It is a rule of cultural geography, Franco Moretti wrote in *Distant Reading*, that 'relatively speaking, comedies do not travel well.' He was concerned with the cinema, but the two explanations he gave apply *a fortiori* to literature. One was what he termed the inertia of language: jokes are predictably weakened, puns disabled by translation. The other was 'the fact that laughter arises out of unspoken assumptions that are buried very deep in a culture's history: and if these are not *your* assumptions, the automatic component so essential to laughter disappears.' Remarking that 'we usually associate the national spirit with the sublime' – unknown soldiers, torn flags and the rest – Moretti observes that what makes a nation laugh is more distinctive than what makes it cry, where 'the same sublime objects reappear relentlessly from one culture to another.' Comedy differentiates. 'All sublime nations resemble each other, we might paraphrase *Anna Karenina*, but when they start laughing, they all do so in their own unique way.'

The general truth of this contrast requires some qualification and unpacking. Though they can of course overlap, satire and wit are to be distinguished from comedy, tragedy from the sublime; while all these can mingle in differing measures in a single work. With this proviso, *A la recherche*, *A Dance* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber* offer variations on the argument. Proust's work, constructed in the register of the sublime, suffers little in universal appeal from its satirical aspect, since the target is so standard and generic – what hierarchical society has ever lacked snobbery or hypocrisy? Cao's is ultimately a tragedy, as his first modern critic, Wang Guowei, understood, even if we don't possess the exact version Cao made of its ending.4 But the place of wit within it is not at all like the pockets of comic relief in Shakespearean tragedy. It is far larger and more defining. In David Hawkes's translation of *The Dream*, an achievement surpassing Scott Moncrieff's or later English versions of Proust in the art of delivering one cultural world – a much stranger one – into another, not only is the wit no barrier to an Anglophone reader, it is inseparable from the character-space of the novel, and its captivation. There, as its bearers, young women occupy a position in the narrative with which *A Dance* cannot compete, let alone *A la recherche*. Like Proust, Cao was much seized of flowers, scarcely fewer varieties than Proust's 270 appearing in *The Dream*, and the title of Proust's second volume – *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* – could all but perfectly fit the first 62 chapters of his novel. But to move from the band at Balbec to the verse-cappers of the Daguanyuan, the garden within the clan compound, is to cast lucozade away for wine, so enormously superior are Cao's powers of female characterisation to the vapid surrogates of Proust's imaginary. In *The Dream*, where flowers have a more pregnant metaphorical force, comedy and tragedy are of equal access. What doesn't travel, at least beyond East Asia, is the escape hatch of religion at the end: redemption through ascesis rather than art, as in Proust, but beyond adepts of the cult of either, to no more effect.

Powell's work fits Moretti's rule best. It is consistently the funniest English narrative of the last century; the proportion of comedy in it is far larger, and far more entangled in a specific society with an unusually complex class stratification, and a specific language with an exceptionally wide range in styles of speech. Here customs form barriers higher than any tariff. But *A Dance* is not, of course, simply or as such a comic novel. Years ago Hilary Spurling described it best, in terms Cao would have grasped immediately. 'The whole sequence unfolds in both real and fictional time like a Chinese scroll painting, a vast canvas streaked with violence and perturbation, suffused with humour, at once passionate and dispassionate, lyrical and absurd, almost disintegrating at points into gloom and chaos, rising at others to fierce, complex, brilliantly coloured climaxes.' Powell's work is not tragic, and does not aim at the sublime, though in it what is comic brushes both. Powell once described the torrential quotation from Burton with which it ends, encompassing all three, as 'a wonderful epitome of what life is like'. Such inclusiveness is not the least reason for the anomalous status of *A Dance*, viewed comparatively.

The international reception, or lack of it, of a work of fiction is one thing, its native standing another. By definition, traits that risk seeming intractably English should present little difficulty in England. At home, however, opinion divides quite sharply, admiration and aversion often appearing in equal supply. There are reasons for resistance to Powell's writing that are themselves specifically English. An introduction to them is offered by the critic who in his own day could be accounted Powell's leading champion. In a front-page spread

in the *TLS*, John Bayley hailed him under the banner of 'A Family and Its Fictions'. There was a conflict in Powell, he explained, between the Gothic and Gallic sides of his imagination, which lent much of the richness to his work – provided the former, with its better indigenous pedigree, had the last word. A figure like Widmerpool might have something in common with denizens of Balzac or Gide, but was reassuringly overlaid with the homely watermarks of Billy Bunter and Colonel von Stumm: 'Mr Powell has contrived to capture the powers of infantilism which underlie the most mesmerising feats of fictional creation,' powers at risk where French influences intruded on 'the more natural climate of Gothic and Dickensian fantasy' in which the author's best self flourished.

Indeed, Bayley maintained, the very technique and tone of *A Dance* was 'determined by a family framework', in which 'other people exist, and become people, because they have joined the family circle in some capacity', for 'the possibilities of character are based on the family' alone. 'Family orthodoxy' was the secret of Powell's narrative success, 'bedtimes tales' nestling snugly within it. Alas, however, its final volume raised the dark question of 'how much the family can absorb, and is absorbing, to survive; how different will be the counter-family if it takes over, how ready to replace authority with tyranny and substitute gross caprice for the freedoms and flexibilities of custom'. Still, newcomers to the series could be counted on to long for revelations of what might next befall its characters 'with the same eagerness with which transatlantic readers waited at the pierhead to get news of Little Nell'.

Dickensian fantasy indeed, at full bore. Family life plays scarcely any role in *A Dance*, outside the Tolland clan and glimpses of the Foxe household. Aside from the infant Pamela's moment at the font, children are completely absent. Powell never showed any particular liking for Dickens, finding much of *Our Mutual Friend* – though he admired the beginning – 'unremitting rubbish'. While acknowledging Dickens's gifts and position in folk memory, he wrote more warmly and less cursorily about Surtees. Abhorring sentimentality, any figure further from his sensibility than the byword for it out of *The Old Curiosity Shop* could hardly be imagined. His literary preferences were the virtual antithesis of Bayley's. Tolstoy, Bayley's prime object of worship, produced two of the world's greatest novels, yet in their basic lack of subtlety they resembled 'magazine stories of genius', unfolding like the movies into which they were so successfully made, his characters 'always to be easily understood in popular terms'.

Bayley loved *A Dance*. 'I could read whatever Powell writes from here to eternity,' he once said. But what his attempt to domesticate him for native consumption shows is one of the reasons Powell is not comfort food for British palates. Powell despised what Bayley prized, and his compatriots wallowed in. English writers could rarely stick to the point, he wrote, or look straight at what was in front of them, 'one eye always swivelling in the direction of fantasy'. What Powell valued was what, choosing his last word with care, Bayley tacitly deprecated as – the polite cough is audible – 'the Gallic pattern of psychological attribution'. Nothing so forbidding as analysis. Formed in the 'hard, cold-blooded, almost mathematical pleasure I take in writing', to which his narrator confesses, Powell's generalising, analytical turn of mind was foreign to the traditions of the English novel. Empirically grounded it remained, but alien to local habits all the same. The imagination at work in *A Dance* has an unsettling intellectual edge. It was no accident that Powell's first critical project, when he was in his twenties, was a book on Stendhal, at a time when no Anglophone study yet existed.

There was a further element in this distance from any standard Englishry. Powell's literary culture was unusually wide. In this country, it is difficult to think of any contemporary novelist who matched it. Proust wrote with feeling about the predecessors he valued – Chateaubriand, Nerval, Baudelaire – and in a coruscating polemic against Sainte-Beuve, exposed as oblivious to the outstanding writers of his period, left a lasting manifesto of critical method. He was no provincial, admiring Goethe and George Eliot along with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. But most of what he wrote on literary matters he left unpublished, and his range was essentially French. As a critic, he is remembered today principally for his dismissal of Sainte-Beuve's aberration in talking about the life of a writer as if it bore on his work, the occasion of his famous pronouncement: 'a book is the product of a different self from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices.'[5] No doubt in part moved by an understandable fear of exposure of his own life to any too inquisitive gaze, Proust was quite unable to live up to his own dictum, proceeding immediately to treat Balzac in much the fashion for which he reproached Sainte-Beuve – plunging right away into castigation of the mercenary vulgarity of Balzac's correspondence, where 'there is no call to differentiate between his letters and his novels.' In effect, the

distinction on which he legitimately insisted could never be a scission such as the mystique of the author to which he aspired would make of it.

Coming later, Powell had access to a landscape of fiction which, for those willing to scan it, had widened considerably after the First World War, and after the Second he reviewed books for a living, a job he enjoyed so much he continued long after it ceased to be an economic necessity. Contributions to the *Spectator*, *Punch*, the *TLS* and the *Daily Telegraph* – his successive standbys – were journalism. They paid little heed to Proust's broadside against Sainte-Beuve. For Powell, biographical information about a writer was usually of pertinent interest. Most of his pieces were short, and often their subjects a matter of chance. But the three books he collected out of forty years of this kind of writing amount to more than a thousand pages, not counting the extensive entries on related matters in his *Journals*. From them emerges a mind of notable learning and decided outlook, as well as a partial explanation of his off-track position in English letters. Strikingly, his retrospect of these – extensive enough – bypasses the Georgian and Victorian novel all but completely: no Austen, no Brontës, Dickens given the merest nod, no Eliot, no Thackeray, no Meredith, no Gissing. The Edwardians fare no better, with Bloomsbury pointedly absent. To all intents and purposes, his coverage of fiction starts with James and Conrad, Hardy and Kipling as proximate backdrop to his own generation – the first and last most important for Powell, an admirer of both, though in no sense a pupil. James he found in the end too niggling and inhibited, Kipling too knowing and unctuous. Joyce was a master of words and phrases, but not, in forsaking the initial naturalism of *Ulysses* for a surfeit of pastiche and pedantry, of form, though he revolutionised it. Wyndham Lewis was to be respected for his lifelong crusade against romanticism, even if not himself immune to it, but – lacking in warmth – was undone by his venomous obsessions. Gerhardie – the last (quasi-) English novelist Powell wrote seriously about – provided a critical link to Russian literature. Polite about contemporaries like Waugh and Greene in public, he was less so in private.

Significantly, Powell's coverage of the European novel starts much earlier: there are tributes to the delicacy and economy of Constant, the irony and generosity of Stendhal, the colossal vitality of Balzac, the comic wildness of Gogol, the inextinguishable energy of Dostoevsky. Alert to less familiar writers of the 19th century, he found Galdós a 'startling discovery', superior in wit and psychological subtlety to Balzac or Dickens; saw in Nievo a portrait of Italy at the time of Napoleon to counter Stendhal's. Along the way, he could be as astringent about such a venerated totem as Flaubert as Nicholas Jenkins is about Trollope: monotonous predictability of plot and characterisation; *Bel Ami* vastly superior to *L'Education sentimentale*; a touch of the mountebank. In the 20th century, he pioneered admiration for Svevo in England, and was first off the mark in hailing Musil, whose appearance he greeted with delight. Among postwar writers, he commended Moravia and Malaparte, and was respectful of Aldanov and Malraux. Critical of Sartre and Mann, cool about Camus and Pasternak, he warmed to Queneau.

These were the novels of others. It is in his own that the effect of Powell's personal culture becomes salient. More real persons are referred to in *A la recherche* than there are characters: on a rough count, about double the number, close to seven hundred. Proust was the first writer to multiply references on such a scale. This was his most direct legacy to *A Dance*, where they become a leading feature too. Powell's handling of them, however, differs. The ratio of the real to the fictive is less: characters outnumber references, if not by much. Their distribution is also distinct. In Proust, artists of one kind or another – principally writers, painters and sculptors, musicians, in that order – comprise about half the roll call, the rest made up of rulers, princelings, politicians, generals, diplomats and the like; in Powell, two-thirds. Within these, Proust was more parochial: 90 per cent of his writers and two-thirds of his painters were French; in Powell, close to half his writers and three-quarters of his painters aren't English.

Allusions are the light infantry of reference, quotations the cavalry. Proust cites some thirty authors, 90 per cent French; Powell around 45, of whom three-quarters are English. Within his national literature, Proust draws on a limited number of sources: eight writers, headed by Hugo, Racine and Saint-Simon, supply nearly half of his quotations, and no one figures whose name is at all out of the way – most are standard classroom material. Within his, Powell quotes much more evenly across a far wider range, stretching to some writers even the best equipped might be tested by: Preston, Peele, Ingelow, De Tabley (one the most enjoyable passages in *A Dance*). The part played by quotation in the two works is also – this is the really critical difference – quite distinct. In Proust, they have two main functions: satirical, in which they figure as the small change of fashionable *causerie*, where regular misattributions – by Bloch, Mme de Cambremer, the duc et duchesse de

Guermantes – show up the ignorance of the smart, or would-be smart, world; or self-corroboratory, as when the narrator invokes Baudelaire to touch up his already lyrical description of the sea, or Chateaubriand to back up his theory of involuntary memory.

In *A Dance*, quotation is not an instrument of satire. It is either a playful note in high-spirited intellectual dialogue, of a kind that Proust's narcissism does not permit, or a poignant signal of what is to come, or has just come – in other words, not mere decor or self-justification but inseparable from the action. In both registers, Powell makes much more intensive use than Proust of poetry, and in doing so – unlike in his own writings on the novel – draws extensively on (often little-known) Victorian, Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline writers, and French lines whose spirit is not to be found in *A la recherche*. Not long before being brigaded, rather rebelliously, to the last great set-piece social occasion on the eve of the war that will be a watershed for the narrator and his friends, Moreland is recalled reciting Rimbaud:

Oisive jeunesse

A tout asservie

Par délicatesse

J'ai perdu ma vie

Then, on emerging from the dinner at Stourwater, and the disastrous tableau vivant that follows it, Baudelaire:

'Eldorado banal de tous les vieux garçons,' said Moreland.

'But that was Cythera,' said Isobel, 'the island of love. Do you think love flourishes at Stourwater?'

'I don't know,' said Moreland, 'love means such different things to different people.'

The atmospheric air pocket is characteristic: a diminuendo not cancelling but intensifying, by contrast, what precedes it. In the same way, when Stringham bids farewell to the narrator, en route to his end in Malaya, after quoting with approval a passage from what in context is an ominous *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, in the same breath he casually remarks that Browning 'always gives the impression of writing about people who are wearing very expensive fancy-dress'.

Three years later, as British tanks roll towards Zutphen, it is Spenser on Sidney, Rochester and his lubricious drinking cup, that drift across the map room. Between Potsdam and Hiroshima, on encountering Widmerpool, who is fresh from intriguing in the bunker of the Cabinet Office and now engaged to Pamela Flitton, the narrator's reaction is to recall a Scottish poet, not exactly a household name:

Some lines of John Davidson suddenly came into my head:

'And so they wait, while empires sprung

Of hatred thunder past above,

Deep in the earth for ever young

Tannhäuser and the Queen of Love'

On reflection, the situation was not a very close parallel, because it was most unlikely Pamela had ever visited Widmerpool's underground office. On the other hand, she herself could easily be envisaged as one of the myriad incarnations of Venus, even if Widmerpool was not much of a Tannhäuser. At least he seemed in a similar way to have stumbled on the secret entrance to the court of the Paphian goddess in the Hollow Hill where his own duties were diurnally enacted.

At the Victory Service in St Paul's soon afterwards, one of the pivots of *A Dance*, the narrator's mixed feelings about a ceremony he finds in many ways more lowering than elevating – his thoughts wandering among the hymns and monuments from war to death to sex to politics – find expression in a free association of floating quotations: *The Ingoldsby Legends*, Canon Twells and Captain Newton, Blake, Cowley, Pope, Edgar Allen Poe succeeding one another, without any straining for effect. At the funeral of a brother-in-law some months later, Herbert and Raleigh – in opposite registers, disinflationary and grandiloquent – come to mind with equally natural ease. The erudition informs, but never clutters the action; distinct from the intellectuality of *A Dance* but related to it, another stumbling block to English habits of reading. Powell was well aware of this, reflecting on 'the ingrained philistinism, illiteracy, humourlessness, fear and hatred of literary references' of most reviewers. In this national culture, there was a time when any unfamiliar word, let alone allusion, could arouse resentment, as if intrinsically an affectation or display of superiority. Today, an instant's tap or click can unfold any term or quotation. Whether the habits they form encourage a more carefree curiosity, elation rather than indignation at encountering something new, remains to be seen.

Concluding her biography, Hilary Spurling laments that 'by the time I reached London in the early 1960s, it was already becoming almost a badge of political correctness in literary circles to disparage the *Dance*,' while since then 'the popular myth of Powell as an arch-Tory and snob's snob' has been virtually impossible to dislodge. Avoiding the subject of his politics, the one major weakness of her book, is not going to dispel this. No one could doubt Powell was conservative. The relevant questions, which bear on his reception in England, are: how important were politics to him, and what kind of conservative was he? Here, too, comparison is illuminating. Claiming he got on as easily with a dustman as a duke, Proust was in practice a social climber absorbed by the world of titles, whose contact with those in overalls was little more than sexual. He could muse (at least, his French editors surmise towards the end of the First World War, as unrest was growing) that it was 'an important social question' whether the hungry poor watching the wealthy dine behind the great glass windows of the hotel in Balbec might not one day break in and make an end of them. But social hierarchy was not to be tampered with: democracy would in all probability not abolish but secretly accentuate it. The innate respect of the nobility for those who were clever but not well-born, 'made revolutions so unjust'. Indeed the revolutionary spirit itself sprang from 'an embittered love of the nobility'.

A Dreyfusard at the turn of the century, after initially joining with Daniel Halévy to secure Anatole France's support of Zola, Proust never published a line of his own in support of Dreyfus, and later deplored the vote of the Chamber affirming Dreyfus's innocence as unnecessarily divisive. On the other hand, he sprang into print to attack measures against the Church, and – when the Bloc des Gauches won the elections of 1906 – fulminated against 'the 'infamy' of the 'Combiste horde' and its 'immoral and absurd triumph' at the polls. These, however, were passing moods; in general, his interest in politics was tepid, save on one score. Indignant that Tolstoy should have criticised the celebration of the Franco-Russian Alliance, a fatal slipway to 1914, Proust explained that while socialism might be altruistic among those of the rich willing to advocate it, for the poor to do so was egoistic, whereas patriotism subordinated egoism to altruism in both classes, uniting them when necessary for the moral duty of war. Like most of his contemporaries across Europe, he never doubted the justice of the cause of his own nation in the First World War, bringing down on him savage words from a youthful Beckett.6 But though an unthinking patriot, by the standards of the time he was a humane one, who criticised indiscriminate denunciations of German culture during the war, and opposed triumphalist bids to proclaim the hegemony of French letters after it. His outlook was, as Jean-Yves Tadié accurately describes it, a liberal conservatism of a largely unpolitical stamp. 'La politique au fond m'est égale.'

Powell's conservatism was much more political, and more radical. It took some time to crystallise, early attitudes not to be collapsed into later views. His first published pieces of writing date from 1924, his second year in Oxford. Among them was a review of a biography of the pre-revolutionary Marat, in which after remarking that the leaders of revolutions could all but universally be classified as 'unqualified scoundrels or tiresome and ill-informed pedants', he went on to observe that 'a hereditary monarchy by the law of averages produces a certain number of good rulers, but a democratic upheaval ensures only that the reins of government are given over into the hands of the morally and intellectually deficient.' Not that unusual a flourish for English undergraduates at the time. A decade later, looking back on his days at Eton, he could write of his house there: 'There had been a period in the immediate past, happily drawing to a close at the time of my arrival, when the non-Aryan proportion in its membership had seemed to many unnecessarily high.' Michael Barber, Powell's

earlier biographer, who first pointed out these passages, sensibly did not make too much of them. Like offhand dismissals of democracy, casual expressions of antisemitism were *comme il faut* in the upper classes of the period, a lightly worn prejudice raising few eyebrows: Graham Greene, who conceived and edited the volume of reminiscences, *The Old School*, in which this essay appeared, was no exception; Orwell gave voice to much the same as an informant for British security in the Cold War. Sharing the typical outlook of his cohort, there is little sign that in these years Powell was any more seriously interested in politics than Proust had been.

As the 1930s set in, and a new literary generation made itself felt, this altered. He was 'totally out of step' with the new mood, he told Barber forty years later: it was a moment when 'committed writing really completely took over, and it felt quite extraordinary if you were another sort of person.' Aversion to Auden and his fellows certainly reinforced Powell's instinctive attachment to the social order against which they railed. Not, however, to the point of picking up any opposite banner. One his closest friends, John Heygate, was a fan of the Nazis, but leanings like this never rubbed off on him. Communism was no barrier to love; his passionate affair with Marion Coates dates from 1933-34. Two years later, he and Violet set off for a summer's holiday in Russia. When the Spanish Civil War broke out and authors were invited to take sides on it, Powell declined to do so, making mild fun of the camps arrayed against each other: amid so many distinguished names, how could such eminences as Beverly Nichols or Godfrey Winn have been overlooked?

It was the Second World War that changed all this, permanently. Powell was 'caught up in a tidal swell' of patriotic feeling, Spurling writes, losing his temper with friends who weren't rising to the occasion. The fate of the country was at stake. After the Continent had fallen to Hitler, when British isolation was broken by the German invasion of Russia, his narrator's reaction is the opposite of Waugh's hero Guy Crouchback, who sees only dishonour in the alliance that lies ahead: 'An immediate, overpowering, almost mystic sense of relief took shape within me. I felt suddenly sure everything was going to be all right.' Subsequent transfer to political duties in the War Office, involving liaison with the Polish forces in exile, brought Powell face to face with disputes over how to react to the German revelation of mass graves at Katyn. Spurling implies, though her wording is careful not to say so explicitly – Powell's memoirs don't make the claim – that it was his opposition to the wish of officialdom to cover up the NKVD massacre of Polish officers in the interests of the Soviet alliance that led to his dismissal from the Cabinet Office. But there is no doubting the strength of his feeling about the killings, and the regime responsible for them. As the war neared its end, he pulled off what he regarded as his major contribution to its successful conclusion, a scheme to ensure that the communist resistance in Belgium, the principal force of underground struggle against the German occupation, was neutralised before it could make a bid for power.

Out of all this, Powell emerged from the war highly politicised, as many hitherto rather unpolitical writers were on the Continent, Sartre an example from the opposite end of the spectrum; fewer in England. His first substantial piece of writing, a long essay on the diaries of the Swiss man of letters Amiel, picked out their bleak warnings of the polar night of despotism that Russia already represented in the 19th century, and the threat it posed Europe should it ever become master of the continent: 'tyranny such as the world has never known, silent as darkness, rigid as ice, insensible as bronze, decked with an outer aimiability and glittering with the cold brilliance of snow, slavery without compensation or relief'. When Attlee quoted this strophe in a speech soon afterwards, Powell took pride in having prompted it. Whether he was right to do so or not, the passage quickly became a Cold War staple, popularised by the *Reader's Digest*. But other than the defeat of Germany and Japan, peace gave him little reason for satisfaction. The mood of his narrator in St Paul's could only be subdued, with a Yugoslav Partisan and other incongruous figures from Eastern Europe in the pews nearby, not to speak of the levelling imprint of Labour on the arrangements of the ceremony itself. The deep depression into which Powell fell after demobilisation may also have had something to do with what he felt about the state of the world once the Conservatives were unsaddled, a possibility Spurling doesn't consider.

Recovered, he fought the good fight against CPGB infiltration of the National Union of Journalists, shoulder to shoulder with his best friend at the time, Malcolm Muggeridge, seeking to convince him of the importance of ousting Labour – whose boast of a national majority in 1945 was bogus – from control of the LCC. Talking about the Spanish Civil War, he and Orwell agreed that if the Republic had won, 'the Reds' would have joined the Nazi-Soviet Pact and invaded France when Hitler attacked it, as Stalin had done in Poland. Of the

alternatives, little as he liked Franco, the victory of the Nationalists was preferable; if forced to choose, he would have supported them. Fascism proper, he would later decide, was essentially a movement of the left. So it is logical that in *A Dance* Widmerpool should first be an apologist for Hitler, and later an asset for Stalin. Congratulating Powell on 'not only what we might call political taste, but true nobility of spirit', his leading American admirer Nicholas Birns has described *Temporary Kings*, in which Widmerpool's treason is portrayed, as 'a major contribution to the literature of anti-communism'.

Such solemn tribute is misplaced. Powell's fiction does not belong with *1984* or *Darkness at Noon*. It is of another sort altogether. Anti-communist, of course, he was. But that was a conviction, not a passion. What defined his outlook was something else, his own brand of patriotism. Anchored in his family background, this was highly distinctive. Though he found his father personally impossible, the institution he represented commanded his unswerving respect from earliest childhood: at the age of eight or nine, Jenkins can already rattle off regiments and their colours to General Conyers. Though not much enjoying service in the field, the army was in Powell's genes, as his nephew Ferdinand Mount has written. For him, patriotism was inseparable from the military record of the country, whose defining experience as he grew up was the First World War, in which his father was a decorated officer, at a time when Britain still headed the largest empire the world had ever seen.

Imperial connections are everywhere in first nine volumes of *A Dance*: Egypt and South Africa, where Uncle Giles suffered disgrace; Kenya, where Umfraville disported himself and Stringham begins his fall; the Gold Coast, where Borrit worked in Intelligence; Persia, where Cutts falls for a cipher clerk; Afghanistan and Burma, where Conyers served as a subaltern; India, where Bagshaw and Trapnel serve in PR; Malaya, where Stringham is killed; China, where treaty revisions form the subject when Widmerpool first holds forth in company (the career of Powell's father came to an unhappy end in Shanghai); even the informal empire in South America, where Brent and Duport are in oil. Powell does not insist on any of these: they are background. Nor does he include any treatment of the First World War itself. Recollection that begins with the news of Sarajevo then jumps to Versailles, with Jeavons's wounds the only real marker of what happened between. But that the Great War formed the touchstone of Powell's own politics is clear. Again and again, in his journals and reviews, he attacked those who either at the time or later questioned its necessity, 'people who waffle about war being avoidable in 1914'. Such anathema to him was any reservation about the war that his literary judgments were inflected by it. The 'antics of Bloomsbury' during the fighting were despicable; but even the war poets did not escape his censure. It was not enough that Apollinaire was legitimately an aesthetic favourite. Heavily wounded at the front and eventually killed by Spanish flu, he had also to be contrasted with Owen and Sassoon's 'strong admixture of self-pity and even a kind of defeatism'. In the country's epilogue to the war, his father served in the British campaign to crush Irish independence. Sixty years later, while conceding it was a quirk, Powell told an interviewer: 'I have the strongest possible dislike of Ireland ... That awful national egotism.'

Vindication of the cause of the Entente remains, of course, the standard reflex of official Anglo-Saxon historiography to this day. Less common are Powell's projections of it backwards to earlier conflicts. The Boer War? 'Even now,' he complained of David Garnett's autobiography, 'he can produce a paean of praise for the pro-Boers.' The Crimean War? '"We don't want to fight, but, by Jingo, if we do" has managed to get a bad name but was a perfectly healthy instinct, especially in insisting that the Russians shall not have Constantinople.' The Napoleonic Wars? Whigs who opposed Pitt were 'near-Quislings'. Or forwards, conjecturing the future fate of the Second World War. In St Paul's:

> We rose once more for another hymn, 'Now thank we all our God', which was, I felt pretty sure, of German origin. Whoever was responsible for choosing it had either forgotten that, or judged it peculiarly apposite for this reason. We had just prayed for the 'United Nations' and 'our enemies in defeat'. In the same mood, deliberate selection of a German hymn might be intended to indicate public forgiveness and reconciliation. Quite soon, of course, people would, in any case, begin to say the war was pointless, particularly those, and their associates, moral and actual, who had chalked on walls, 'Strike Now in the West' or 'Bomb Rome'.

Politically speaking, Powell had, of course, no time for socialism. But he was more consistently exercised by liberalism, to which his hostility never wavered. Personified in *A Dance* in the voluble posturing of the Oxford don Sillery, he regarded it as a danger to any stable social order. 'Liberalism (to which the Labour Party also essentially belongs) is a force unconsciously seeking anarchy,' he said. The English were all too prone to it. Looking back, a case like Shelley's illustrated Dostoevsky's dictum that liberalism in one generation bred nihilism in the next. If the description seems atypically extreme, the reason for it is clear. Liberals were found wanting whenever Britain was at war: who could forget Forster's credo that he would rather betray his country than a friend? Behind Woolf or Strachey lay such as Hobson, Cobden, Hazlitt, Shelley. Campbell-Bannerman had wanted to scuttle in South Africa; Asquith had failed to prepare for the Great War and bungled conduct of it. That, historically, for every British liberal who opposed an imperialist war a hundred had typically supported it only underlines how affected Powell's angle of vision was by a tiny scattering of literary dissent in August 1914.

If liberalism was the formula for a rootless anarchy, what were the bulwarks against it? There he held fast to the institution to which he had paid homage in his first political pronouncement at Oxford. In *A Dance*, the monarchy enters the narrative with the Abdication crisis, when Widmerpool, hinting at a newly gained standing in exalted circles, banks on the marriage of the king to Mrs Simpson, a sure sign this would be a bad thing. Powell had strong views about royal duty, as his opinion of dramatis personae sixty years later would show. En route to Los Angeles in 1937, he celebrated the coronation of George VI on board ship in the Caribbean with such exuberance that he woke up with the worst hangover of his life. In later years, he and his wife were faithful television viewers of Trooping the Colour and the Cenotaph ceremony. When he was made a Companion of Honour – unaware that the likes of Eric Hobsbawm, whose presence on a George Orwell fund sufficed for him to refuse to join it, would in due course receive the same bauble – he was so overcome that he listed the congratulations he received across twenty pages of his normally sharp-witted and vivid *Journal*: the one occasion on which he truly became the caricature Spurling deplores.

The monarchy, of course, was not in itself enough to stay the forces of disorder. By the turn of the 1960s, as the Macmillan government came under satirical bombardment, he was on the alert against talk of the Establishment, a 'silly phrase'; those who regarded themselves as anti-Establishment often displayed 'amusing pomposities that far outstrip anything against which they are themselves up in arms'. On the appearance of the counterculture, he observed that the Beats and hippies would have made an admirable subject for the brush of George Grosz. These were asides, while he was composing *A Dance*. By the time he completed the sequence, in the mid-1970s, far worse had been let loose, liberalism incubating precisely the anarchy he had foreseen, with its climax in Labour's Winter of Discontent. By then, as he subsequently told her, Powell had decided that Thatcher was 'the Answer'. Aside from her personal attractions – she reminded him of Io in her rapture with Zeus in Correggio's painting, her voice too casting a certain spell – her political firmness won his unconditional admiration, even if all she could speak of at supper was public affairs. In 1990 his dismay at her fall knew no bounds. 'Owing to the insane antics of the Tory Party Mrs Thatcher has resigned, impossible not to comment *quem perdere deus vult, prius dementat*,' he noted in his diary. Three days later:

> I wrote to Mrs Thatcher expressing regret at her resignation, saying that at one of the dinner parties where I met her she had spoken of Dostoevsky's The Possessed (in Russian The Devils), i.e. those that entered into the swine, which then rushed over the cliff. This seemed a perfect example of what had happened to her, the swine being her betrayers in the Tory Party.

Powell had no hesitation in describing himself as a traditional Tory. He detested, he said, wet variants like Heath. Asked if he did not think Ferdie Mount wrote very well, 'I replied that some of his political stuff was not sufficiently High Tory for me.' One surmises family differences over Europe. The Danish referendum of 1992 is unlikely to have pleased Mount. Powell's reaction – readers of this paper will shudder – could not have been more cheerful: 'I am absolutely delighted by the Danes buggering up the EC.' Uninhibited opinions like these typified the vigour of his private outlook. They pose the question of its relation to the public art of *A Dance*. There, certainly, James Tucker was right to be troubled by an aspect of Powell's depiction of Widmerpool, otherwise deemed superb ('he grows into rottenness'), in his progress from schoolboy unpopularity to adult careerism, callousness, treachery, voyeurism and ultimate dementia: 'It is a worrying equation which makes

social ineptitude and lowish family signify latent delinquency.' That said, it is characteristic of the sequence that there are also occasions when the narrator, quite credibly, feels sympathy, even a kind of solidarity, with Widmerpool.

'Allowing the characters the author dislikes no marks at all is a self-defeating practice, if only too easy to fall into,' Powell noted in his *Journal* (Waugh was an example). In *A Dance*, he avoided it. His feelings about the literary left of the 1930s were savage – and who can say he was wrong about typical stuff like 'we must love one another or die,' a world-class inanity intoned, with poetic justice, by Lyndon Johnson as he escalated the war in Vietnam – but in *A Dance* he took care to represent it in the entertaining, in neither case entirely negative, figures of Quiggin and Members, critics rather than poets, in whom traces of Connolly and Quennell are discernible, rather than Auden or Spender, whom he cordially despised. The nearest the narrator ever gets to a direct political statement expresses the core belief of Powell's conservatism. It is characteristically low-key. At the funeral of one brother-in-law, a high-minded, eccentric pacifist of the left, soon after the death from war wounds of another, a dull if good-natured and not very successful businessman, Jenkins compares the two. The former had been in 'a fervent anxiety to set the world right'; the latter 'had never shown much concern with righting the world, except that in a sense his death might be regarded as stemming from an effort at least to prevent the place from getting worse'.

Powell said he couldn't stand people who wanted to put the world to rights. In the long retrospect of *A Dance*, did it get significantly worse? Many critics have thought so. For Pritchett, the sequence depicted 'a society in the process of disintegration'; for Bergonzi, 'a shabby and dispirited society'; for Mount, 'the shabby, uncertain, apprehensive character of British life', 'a background of decay and exhaustion', 'the worn-out quality, inescapable shabbiness of nearly all the places where the action is set'. This is surely overdone. Belgravia, Berkeley Square, Hill Street, Regent's Park were and are not exactly down-at-heel; nor are leading characters lacking in energy or vitality, not a few at different points brimming with them. Certainly, the traditional world in which Powell grew up and in which the opening episodes of the narrative are set, when the social system of the Belle Epoque was still largely intact and the expanse of the British Empire had never been so vast, had crumbled away by the end of the sequence. It is also true, though less remarked, that the great ferment of the first quarter of the century in the arts, much of it coming from Europe, which lent a cultural excitement to the period that Powell would never forget, had petered out by the 1930s and would never be repeated. By the time he came to write *A Dance*, there was much for him to regret. But there is scarcely any trace of nostalgia in it. That absence – given the social landscape that had already emerged when he started composing *A Dance*, let alone which surrounded him when he completed it, and his political outlook in this period – is impressive, even uncanny. What explains it? Two passages from his writing, one from *The Military Philosophers* and the other from the last volume of his memoirs, *The Strangers All Are Gone*, suggest the answer. The first is the way the Victory Service of 1945 ends. The congregation rises to sing 'God Save the King', whose three verses are given in full. Within a year, the second would be altered at royal command for the First General Assembly of the UN, held in London in 1946, 'to bring it more into the spirit of the brotherhood of nations'. The narrator reflects:

> There must have been advantages, moral and otherwise, in living at an outwardly less squeamish period, when high-thinking had not yet cloaked such petitions as those put forward in the second verse, incidentally much the best; when, in certain respects at least, hypocrisy had less of stranglehold on the public mind. Such a mental picture of the past was no doubt largely unhistorical, indeed totally illusory, freedom from one sort of humbug merely implying, with human beings of any epoch, thralldom to another. The past, just as the present, had to be accepted for what it thought and what it was.

The second passage will have been composed in 1981, the year before publication of the volume in which it appears, at a low point in Thatcher's rule, when she had recoiled at the threat of a miners' strike, before triumph in the Falklands and stockpiling of coal to crush the NUM. Powell is on tour in India, watching a temple monkey in Benares appear to read a tattered newspaper, then as if in uncontrollable exasperation cast it away and leap to the topmost ledge of the temple, to rest and regain composure:

> In that parade of utter dissatisfaction with things I became aware of a strong fellow feeling. How often do the papers report some item that seems to demand just such energetic and immediate form of self-release – had one

the monkey's agility – as the only practical means of discharging inward discontents, rage, contempt, despair, at what one reads in the papers.

This is the only time, in all his writing, that Powell ever yielded to an *O tempora! O mores!* It is a very strong one. The passage continues:

It is better to remain calm; try to remember that all epochs have had to suffer assaults on common sense and common decency, art and letters, honour and wit, courage and order, good manners and free speech, privacy and scholarship; even if sworn enemies of these abstractions (quite often wearing the disguise of friends) seem unduly numerous in contemporary society.

This great enumeration of the values to which Powell held, complete with its typical baffle against sonority – they remain abstractions – is unique, too, in his work.

The eloquence of both passages lies in the critical tension which inoculated *A Dance* against the temptations of nostalgia. Asked, halfway through its composition, whether the intention was simply to record social change or also to evaluate it, he replied: 'Certainly not the latter. I'm not trying to evaluate.' Powell's imagination was deeply historical, as Proust's was not. He was also much more deeply conservative. That could easily have led to a threnody of time past, not individual as in *A la recherche*, but political and cultural. What checked any such move was the other side of his conservatism, conviction of the constancy of human nature, which he shared with Proust. In the tension spanning those two sides lay the difference between them, which cascades down the last page of *A Dance*. All epochs – the word occurs in each of the above passages – are equal in the eyes, not of Ranke's god, but of Burton's panoptic gaze, which encompasses the fate at once of individuals and of states, the private and the public worlds of human life. Selectively: on the one hand, 'vows, wishes, actions ... weddings, maskings, mummeries ... revels ... funerals, burials', 'one runs, another rides, wrangles, laughs, weeps'; and on the other, 'new books every day ... new discoveries, expeditions', 'leagues', 'battles fought, so many men slain ... strategems ... treasons ... enormous villainies in all kinds ... new lords and officers created ... great men deposed'. In sum, 'now comical, then tragical matters'.

Powell's sensibility, productively divided yet balanced between the historical and perennial, was remote from the right-wing cronies of his later years. In these and other matters, each dimmer, coarser and more provincial than the next, it is fitting that Muggeridge, Naipaul, Larkin should all have turned on him.7 The liberals he disliked were to be less disobliging, but could hardly be expected to show much enthusiasm. James Wood, castigating postwar English fiction in *The Broken Estate* as a house of 'thick theories and slender fulfilments' (few characters of any substance; childishly explicit with symbol and allegory; bossy authorial intrusion; shallow comic effects), instanced Golding, Carter, Spark, Drabble, Byatt, Murdoch, Wilson, the Amises. Powell? Unnameable: in a feat worthy of a latter-day Sainte-Beuve, beyond even deprecation. The left? One night at the turn of the 1970s, slumped in a dive on Margaret Street (Trapnel territory: the scene could have come from *Books Do Furnish a Room*), a swarthy cadre of the revolution, famously farouche and not known for much interest in literary matters, extremely drunk, startled the company with a sudden vehement declaration: 'There are two kinds of art. There is good reactionary art, and bad reactionary art.' The maxim certainly cut the Gordian knot of many a far left dispute over the relations between aesthetics and politics. Even if counterexamples – Brecht, Sartre, Garcia Márquez – could readily be mustered, its paradoxical radicalism is still perhaps worth reflecting on; capable, at least, of offering any self-respecting *enragée* licence to enjoy *A Dance to the Music of Time* with a good conscience. Brexit? Where I-Love-EU is in inverse relationship to the faintest idea about the Union, enthusiasm about Europe dispensing with the need to know anything of a solitary one of its cultures or politics, let alone have a glimmering of the labyrinths of Brussels, there can be no takers. Powell was too European for that. In France, Proust did not achieve his position as the literary equivalent of Joan of Arc until after the Third Republic of which he was a product had collapsed, Germany had occupied France, been defeated, and another historical era begun, in which his stature gained consensus from distance. Though the world that produced him and which his novels depict has largely disappeared, no comparable elapse of epoch or change of circumstance separates us from Powell. The least English of writers, the most English of writers, he continues to be immeasurable, at home and abroad.

Different Speeds, Same Furies

Perry Anderson

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by Hilary Spurling.

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Are there any appropriate dimensions to literary biography as a form? The stature of a writer, and length of life, might be expected to provide some co-ordinates. Yet even among modern masters there is little consistency. James died in his early seventies, Musil in his early sixties: Leon Edel and Karl Corino awarded them each two thousand pages. Kafka, who barely reached the age of forty, yielded only five hundred fewer from Reiner Stach. Proust, expiring at 51, got just under a thousand apiece from Jean-Yves Tadié and William Carter; Joyce, at 59, eight hundred from Richard Ellmann. Moving down the scale to medium or lightweights, there is little reduction in size. If we confine ourselves to Britain, Martin Stannard produced a thousand pages on Evelyn Waugh, who died when he was 62; Graham Greene, who survived him by a quarter of a century, received two thousand from Norman Sherry. These are huge tomes. Even such a minuscule figure as Kingsley Amis has been encased in an obese 995 pages from Zachary Leader.

Hilary Spurling's Life of Anthony Powell breaks with this pattern. The longest-lived of all significant novelists of the last century, his 94 years are covered in fewer than 450 pages of text. In part, that's because she confines the final quarter of his life to the briefest of postscripts. Yet his memoirs, which run to nearly double the length of her biography, stop at much the same cut-off point. Did they cover so much ground that little was to be gained by treading it again? By no means. In the four volumes of *To Keep the Ball Rolling*, scintillating portraits of his contemporaries screen notable discretion about himself. Nor has Spurling's own practice as a biographer in the past been so succinct. Her double-decker biographies of Compton-Burnett and Matisse, each of them outstanding, are considerably longer than her Life of Powell. Would the difference be due to her relationship with the subject, a close friend whom for many years she knew and admired – Christopher Sykes on Waugh is the nearest parallel? In such cases, affection can shape the compass of a biography, personal knowledge lighting up but also limiting what can be said. Perhaps there are traces of that here; but, on the whole, in the warmth and grace of Spurling's account there is a natural tact but little sign of inhibition. Perhaps simple consideration of sales was a factor: over a certain length, publishers rarely break even. Aesthetically speaking, at all events, the economy of her study is not out of keeping with its subject: Powell, a disciplined writer with a laconic streak of his own, would have appreciated it.

What does Spurling add to the story outlined in Powell's memoirs and projected in his fiction: military father, excruciating prep school; happiness at Eton, depression at Oxford; job in publishing, deadpan early novels, marriage into the Pakenhams; war service in Northern Ireland and Allied Liaison; postwar triumph with *A Dance to the Music of Time*? The most striking revelations come where he said least, of his childhood and his loves. The finest thing in Spurling's book is her delicate portrait of the extraordinary union that produced Powell and shaped his infancy. Though both parents came from gentry families, their marriage defied convention, since his mother was 15 years older than his father, who wed at the age of 22 – an age gap frowned on enough in civilian life, but virtually unheard of in the army. Breaking a still greater taboo, before they were married she travelled on her own to South Africa to join him during his service in the Boer War. Sadly, however, the price of such daring was thereafter, in Spurling's surmise, her all but complete withdrawal from society out of timidity at being taken for a cradle-snatcher, which Powell's father – her opposite in temperament – did little to offset, given his own volcanic temper with the world at large. Within the nuclear cell, the marriage itself was a success, though the social isolation of the family was compounded by the uprooted, nomadic character of army life. As to its consequences for the future author, Spurling opens her book: 'Small, inquisitive and solitary, the only child of an only son, growing up in rented lodgings or hotel rooms, constantly on the move as a boy, Anthony Powell needed an energetic imagination to people a sadly underpopulated world from a child's point of view.'

Such, at the outset, was his external environment. Within the family, the extreme contrast between his parents – his father 'a champion grudge-bearer, liable to resort at the smallest real or imagined slight in public or private to hysterical rage', his 'calm, generous and open' mother 'a born peacemaker' – left a two-fold mark on him: on the one hand, acquiring as a baby 'the rock-bottom security that came from being unconditionally loved by his mother', who bore him when she was 38; on the other, learning as a boy from the spectacle of his father the need for 'strategies of discipline and restraint'. Arrival at the age of 13 at Eton, a year after the Great War had come an end, brought him in Spurling's view

the underlying stability and continuity that came from a sense he had never known before of belonging to a community that accepted him, the nearest thing to a place where he felt at home. The school became from now on a kind of virtual extended family whose members – however rebarbative, reluctant or remote – stood in all his life for the actual relatives he hadn't got.

Fortunate in finding himself in a house 'with a poor reputation and no standards to keep up', presided over by an easy-going master, he flourished as a member of the school's Arts Society, did well academically, and emerged more polished and confident socially.

Oxford was an abrupt reversal: depressed and inchoate, he got little out of the university, and left with a poor degree. Remarking that his subsequent accounts of his time there were 'both vague and characteristically harsh', Spurling conjectures that with ingenuous good looks, he may have suffered from unwanted advances in a setting where homosexuality was not unusual. Certainly his main later complaint was the impossibility of any relation with girls, under vigilant bar by the authorities. There was also his lack of money for the lavish living affected by smart undergraduates, and his relative modesty of background – an absence of snobbish connections Spurling takes to have left him lonely and disoriented, his social life 'arid, sometimes non-existent' in London on going down.

Reacting against standard images of Powell as the consummate denizen of an aristocratic beau monde, more than one reviewer of Spurling has bent the stick in the opposite direction, depicting him as by her account an outsider who eventually made his way, through literary achievement and likeability, from social disadvantage to exalted company. This notion is only a little more accurate than the received version. One third of the boys in Powell's house at Eton came from titled families; at Oxford he was a member of the Hypocrites Club, haunt of iconoclast high-rollers; in London, he was shoehorned by a former staff captain of his father's, without even applying for it, into a job with a publisher with authors like James, Strindberg, Ford and Belloc historically on its list. As Michael Barber, an earlier biographer of Powell, without access to his archives, remarked, it was a period where a little privilege went a long way. There is no reason to doubt that at least in his first year in the capital, Powell felt at sea in London, of limited means, liable to be snubbed or dropped. Flexible though each may have been, there were different levels in the upper social hierarchy of the time. Still, a certain worldly success came early. Powell reached London when he was 21. At 25 he had published his first novel, *Afternoon Men*, well received by critics across the board, and sufficiently popular with readers for a fan letter to yield him a fashionable mistress in Chelsea, after an earlier affair with Nina Hamnett, model for Modigliani and his route into bohemia.

Powell was reticent about these matters in his memoirs, leaving readers to deduce the possible significance or otherwise of the women featuring in them prior to his marriage in 1934. Spurling offers a sequence of vivid silhouettes, panels in a period fresco, of what he omitted: failures with the débutante Adelaide Biddulph and the model Enid Firminger; passages with Nina Hamnett and Dorothy Varda, another model, both of them self-destructive; a fling with the artist Juliet O'Rourke, wife of a modernist architect; a tumble in the afternoon with the Irish writer Mary Manning; a 'great passion' for Marion Coates, wife of another architect, before his wedding to Violet Pakenham, sixth daughter of a Longford earl. All these set in an interwar landscape where bohemia and *la bonne société* – hostesses, adventurers, artists, intellectuals – overlapped as in the first half of *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Marriage extended rather than altered this, Powell acquiring many an in-law from

an Anglo-Irish background to which he was allergic, while his wife 'slipped effortlessly' into 'a shabby, rootless urban world unlike any she had known before'. Spurling's portrait of Violet Powell – another part of his life, as he often said, that he could never describe – is the second great virtue of her book. Written with an underlying *entre femmes* warmth and understanding, its stress falls on 'her extraordinary openness to experience, her voracious hunger for life and the energy she put into it'. High-spirited and quick-witted, becoming in due course a fluent writer herself, she proved a temperamental and intellectual partner rare in that generation, whose impact on Powell's postwar fiction was no small one: in their son Tristram's words, her memory 'was, as it were, the right arm of my father's imagination'.

With the onset of the Second World War, *A Dance* becomes more closely autobiographical, his memoirs moving in parallel, and once the novel sequence itself started to be published, at the turn of the 1950s, it naturally dominated his life. Across this stretch of time, there is – with one exception – less that is new in Spurling's narrative, which contracts accordingly: three-quarters of it covering the first 45 years of his life, a quarter the subsequent 25. She is also the author of a comprehensive handbook to the series, published shortly after it was completed, and her commentary on it here is always to the point, if tilted towards identification of characters with real persons, a regular tendency in critics whose oversimplifications Powell himself often warned against, if occasionally also allowed. Spurling's principal trophy is pinning the original of his most celebrated creation, Widmerpool, on the colonel who hired and fired him in the wartime Cabinet Office, Denis Capel-Dunn, an 'undistinguished' lawyer in civil life who perished on a flight back from the founding conference of the UN in San Francisco, to no great distress on Powell's part. With the completion of *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, the last volume of *A Dance,* Spurling effectively brings her biography to a close. Its brief postscript describes her friendship with him, his subsequent brace of novels, the honours and travails of old age, his final infirmity. Though tight-lipped, it makes a moving conclusion.

Yet there is undeniably an element of paradox in its upshot. What more sense do we gain of Powell himself as a person, once launched on adult life? Spurling observes of the biography he produced after the war, *John Aubrey and His Friends*, that 'for all the author's evident respect and affection, its subject never comes to life as Aubrey makes his own subjects do.' How far can the same be said of her account of him? Good-natured, amusing, affable, to many he also seemed inscrutable. 'Nobody could get the wrong impression of you,' a woman friend once told him, 'because you don't give them anything to go on.' To interviewers he would deflect questions about himself with the disarming claim: 'I never feel strongly myself what my own character is like.' 'I have absolutely no picture of myself. Never have had.' Spurling knew him well, but he was in his sixties by the time she met him, when such defences were long in place. By the time she came to write his biography, he had outlived every one of his contemporaries who might have had unexpected perceptions or memories of him: the lack of third-party insight or witness in the story is striking. There was nothing to be done about that.

Still, signs of considerable inner turbulence beneath the unruffled surface Powell presented to the world were there. He suffered from nearly permanent insomnia ('In my early days I never slept a wink'), late on installing a camp bed by his desk so as not to keep his wife awake too. Prey not only to bouts of paralysing accidie, 'the feeling that nothing's worth doing', but to spells of black depression – after an unsuccessful sortie to Hollywood in 1937, and in still more acute form, on returning to civilian life again after the war, when 'every morning he wished he were dead' – in his memoirs he implied a rather different explanation for having nothing to say when asked about his character, observing that 'not everyone can stand the strain of gazing down too long into the personal crater, with its scene of Hieronymus Bosch activities taking place in the depths.' Spurling, tacitly treating his depressions as discrete episodes, without much bearing on what he may have been like at some deeper level, does not recall this graphic image. Reluctance to venture much psychological surmise after Powell landed in London is visible in other ways. Reporting his claim never to have raised his voice again after leaving Eton, she later shows he was not so imperturbable: 'rage and frustration' at the tedium and inanity of life in the army 'drove him to the kind of explosion he had witnessed as a child from his father'; he 'lost control' after Graham Greene's obstruction of his book on Aubrey; he was hopelessly drunk with 'unguarded anger, bitterness and shock' on dismissal as literary editor at *Punch*; he severed his long-standing ties with the *Daily Telegraph* in 'grief and rage' at infantile barbs from the junior Waugh. Some of the materials for a more complex, in all probability no less sympathetic, portrait of Powell lie plain in the pages of this biography. But by choice, certainly not inability, they are denied synthesis.

The one arresting novelty in the latter half of Spurling's narrative is that Violet Powell had an affair during the war with someone she described to Sonia Orwell as the love of her life, without identifying the lover. Spurling writes with typical understanding of the conditions making for such an affair, and attributes Powell's postwar depression to his discovery of it. In the most startling single passage of her book, she argues that the famous scene in which Powell's narrator, Nick Jenkins, takes Jean Templer in his arms – in the back of a car, speeding through night and snow along the Great West Road, past the neon sign where a bathing belle 'dives eternally through the petrol-tainted air': the opening embrace of the principal romance of the series – mingles the lightning suddenness of Powell's courtship of Violet with the beauty and marital circumstances of her predecessor Marion Coates, on whom Jean was modelled, transferring the pain of Violet's infidelity to the successive deceptions of Jean.

This is an ingenious reconstruction, which seems to have the authority of Violet behind it. But if it is accurate, it only shows how the extraordinary power of a creative imagination transformed particles of experience into the universe of his fiction, since there is not the least hint of the enigmatic sexual waywardness of Jean in anything represented by Spurling of either woman in real life. This is not to say there is no mystery in Powell's affair with Marion Coates, of whose emotional and sensual straightforwardness Spurling paints an attractive picture. But it lies elsewhere. What is truly strange about the connection is the fact, which Spurling reports without any expression of surprise, that Marion, born in China and schooled in England, 'gentle, self-contained and demure with a softness and sweetness of manner that hid a cool analytical brain and a streak of unexpected toughness', was a lifelong communist, whose intellectual mentor was J.D. Bernal. Given his own political outlook, a more unlikely figure for Powell to fall passionately in love with is difficult to imagine.

Did he ever stray after marriage, as his wife once did? If so, his discretion has never been breached. Glamorous photographs to be found in this biography and his memoirs – of Miranda Christen, adventuress installed by Powell in Islington as stenographer for Orwell, or Georgina Ward, actress in a belated stage version of his prewar novel *Afternoon Men* – tell no tales. His friend Alan Ross, editor of the *London Magazine*, thought that surrounded by promiscuous friends, he may have simply found a vicarious pleasure, productive for his fiction, in observing them, while conducting his own marital life with the meticulous sexual correctness Jenkins whimsically fancies of the usurper Gyges in *Temporary Kings*. That is quite possible. Spurling says nothing either way. A protective motive is more or less explicit at the end of her book, but it is directed elsewhere. Though herself not especially distant from them, she has reasons for not wanting to dwell on Powell's politics, which play less of a role in her story than in either his life or his art. Her concern is for his contemporary reputation, in her view diminished by a disobliging myth of them.

There is no doubt that, as Isabelle Joyau, a French critic, has put it, the question of literary status is unusually acute in the case of Powell. It is difficult to think of another writer where opinions diverge so widely. Readers of his work, the American scholar Nicholas Birns observes, tend to be either addicts or indifferent, to love or to hate it: 'There is not the dutiful normative respect coupled with limited concrete enthusiasm garnered by so many canonical modern writers.' The reasons for that, however, have in the first instance little to do with its political dimensions, significant though these certainly are. They relate to the nature of his project as a whole. In scale and design, the architecture of *A Dance to the Music of Time* is unique in Western literature. Scale: the novel covers a period of more than half a century, from 1914 to 1971. Design: it forms a sequence of 12 self-standing but completely interconnected works. Why is this combination unique? Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, covering the history of society from the Revolution to the last years of the July Monarchy, is comparable in span. But its 91 volumes form no single narrative: they are separate fictions, in which characters may reappear a few times, but the stories are essentially disconnected, at best unified ex post facto by the more or less arbitrary categories of the creator's 'system'. The twenty volumes of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle start with a prelude in the Ancien Régime, but as their subtitle, 'The Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire', indicates, 18 of the novels are set in the two decades of Louis Napoleon's rule, integrated only by a doctrine extraneous to them, ostensibly obeying a biological determinism. In Spain, Galdós produced 46 *Episodios Nacionales*, from the Battle of Trafalgar to the fall of the First Republic, but these are historical novels in the strict sense, comprising five distinct series, each with a new hero, and each recounting major political conflicts through the adventures of an individual.

The more relevant comparison, it is sometimes felt, is between Powell and Proust. There are good reasons for this. In the titles of the two novels, *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *A Dance to the Music of Time*, the dominant term is the same. Their length is very similar: 1,240,000 words in Proust, 1,130,000 in Powell. Bearing in mind that French is syntactically more prolix than English – translations of the latter into the former typically increase in size by some 15 per cent – the longer work may actually be Powell's. In both, a unitary overall narrative encompasses successive distinct volumes. The social settings and occasions of each have much in common, aristocrats and artists, dinners and parties featuring prominently in both. The predominant focus of each is on sexual relations. Both are delivered in a high style. Both are inlaid with literary, painterly and other aesthetic references. Both are tours de force in comedy.

How far in any of these aspects was Powell, two generations younger, directly indebted to his predecessor? In his many considerations of other writers – three volumes covering English, European and American literature – none figures so frequently as Proust, a revelation to him already at Oxford. There is no question that *A la recherche* was one of the preconditions of *A Dance*, which could not have been written without the formal breakthrough it represented. But Lermontov and Fitzgerald were equally, in certain respects perhaps more, important as inspirations. Powell was no one's epigone. When he is set beside Proust, it is not the connections between them, but the disparities in reception that are most significant. The literature on Proust is an ocean, at the latest count more than three thousand titles. On Powell, fewer than a dozen: seven studies from America, one each from France, Japan, Switzerland – and one from Britain. Figures like these have no conceivable relation to respective achievement. They call for other kinds of explanation.

Two, of course, come readily to mind. Proust transformed the parameters of the novel as a genre, in a way that only Joyce matched. That accords him a place of his own in its history. Then there is the fact, now a thing of the past, but central for the better part of a century, of French predominance in the world republic of letters. Neither of these tells us much, however, about the specific literary qualities of *A la recherche*. There is a sense, indeed, in which both have tended to obscure them. In the huge modern literature on Proust, it is noticeable how little of it is actual criticism, in any traditional meaning of the term, as distinct from documentation or devotion. That this has been a general drift across the discipline, Joseph North has argued in his recent *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* with good reason. *A fortiori* in the case of such an eminence as Proust. In the academy, criticism as once understood is, on the whole, at a discount. Comparison tends to fall with it. Not just as suspect for other reasons – *de gustibus* – but because it is inherent in judgment of any kind, which always implies a distinction or opposition within a commensurable set of values.

Such preventions are superstitions. Without critical comparison, reading is intellectually and aesthetically blind. Where two writers are at once as similar and dissimilar as Proust and Powell, they invite interrelated judgments. A starting point, as good as any, is offered by background. The contiguity in the ambience of their novels, appreciable but far from complete, was not a product of common origins. Powell's family were not particularly well off, but belonged to what historically was regarded as the *nobilitas minor* – rural gentry without titles. Proust came from an extremely rich bourgeois household in Paris, closely connected to the highest circles of power in the Third Republic. His maternal grandmother was a niece of Adolphe Crémieux, author of a famous decree according French citizenship to the Jews of Algeria during the Second Empire, and after its fall minister of justice in the republican government of national defence of 1871. His father was a friend of Félix Faure, president of the Third Republic in the last years of the 19th century, who expired in one of its most famous scandals, in the course – his *pompe funèbre*, as it was widely dubbed – of fellation by his mistress. The foreign minister Gabriel Hanotaux, champion of colonial expansion in Africa, was a guest at his dinner table. This was a republican elite of distinctly *roturier* origins: Faure had been a tanner, Hanotaux's father was a provincial lawyer. When Proust's mother followed his father to the grave, he inherited at the age of 34 a fortune of about $5 million. He never earned a centime or had to do a day's work in his life. If Powell was in one writer's words 'liminal' to a socially fashionable world, it was a boundary he would cross quite easily, without being overly impressed by the other side. Proust arrived much earlier in smart society, from the age of 17 dandled for his good looks and wit in aristocratic salons. Dazzled by the *ci-devant* world of a class which, cut off – unlike its counterparts in England, Germany, Austria or Russia – from power, compensated for political impotence with extravagant social pretensions and mannerisms, Proust settled in to a lifelong frequentation of it, if modulated over time by illness and reclusion.

Out of his exceptional gifts and this crucible came the revolutionary achievement of *A la recherche* as a novel. Technically speaking, that lay in its combination of two attributes, each without precedent: monumentality of narrative scale and intensity of elaborate introspection – a fictional universe teeming with characters, steeped in an unremitting interiority, made one in an intricate poetry of complex syntax and imagery. Thematically speaking, too, this was the first sustained representation of same-sex relations in Western literature. Moving fluently across comic and tragic registers, the grandeur of *A la recherche* was immediately recognised by contemporaries: 'one of the great minds and imaginations of our day', Edmund Wilson wrote in the 1920s, 'absolutely comparable' to 'the Nietzsches, the Tolstoys, the Wagners and the Ibsens of a previous generation'.

All literary magnitudes are finite. In the case of great writers, it is understandable that their vices should attract so much less attention, not infrequently to vanishing point, than their virtues; but not defensible. For all its gifts, Proust's work has conspicuous shortcomings, regularly ignored in the cult of it. Time – the grandiloquent leitmotif of the novel – is handled erratically at the episodic level of the narrative, in ways that cannot be explained by the vagaries of the narrator's memory. Proust, who rarely dated his letters, blurred temporality by avoidance of any specifications of age, and frequent resort to the iterative form of the past imperfect ('Aunt Léonie would ... '), but lapses of control are obvious enough. Odette's visit as a courtesan to Uncle Adolphe when the narrator is plainly older than when she figures for him as Swann's wife; references to historical events impossible at the time of fictional episodes – Edward VII's state visit to Paris (1903), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), the death of the Swedish king Oscar II (1907), all at an early stage of talk about the Dreyfus Affair (1898) etc: the external and internal chronologies of the novel do not fit. More significant is the stasis of the society depicted in the arc of the narrative as a whole. Between the 1870s, when the story of Swann hypothetically begins, and the aftermath of the First World War, when the novel ends, virtually the only area of change is technological. Electrical lights replace gas lamps, motor cars replace coaches, telephones and aeroplanes appear: otherwise, all remains essentially as it was. Even the war alters only fashions in dress, and the guests at the same receptions. History, for Proust, was romantic imaginings of a medieval or Renaissance past – 'the distant gules of kingly France'. It had little or no meaning for him in the present. The passage of time is purely existential, the slide towards decrepitude and death. The mystique of involuntary memory he erected around it was essentially defensive. In his remarkable *Proust among the Stars,* the one study of *A la recherche* equal to its splendours, Malcolm Bowie observed with justice that while Time in this mode is 'a "big" controlling theme', calling forth 'an impressive philosophical diction', it 'levitates too obligingly above the restless detail of Proust's writing' in ways that can be 'intimidating and coercive', the strengths in his handling of it lying elsewhere. 'It is down among Proust's intricate propositional structures with their outrageous embeddings, suspensions and redundancies that his boldest pieces of temporal architecture are to be found.'

Like capitalised time, characters are another overdone feature in standard encomia of the novel. For the most part, these have plenty of life, but lack any depth. Where they are most vivid, Proust's portraits belong to the art of caricature. They depend on repetition and exaggeration, resembling the garish dummies that are a feature of Dickens more than anything in prior French fiction. There is a range here: at the lower end, the dullards of the Verdurin salon, Cottard, Brichot, Saniette and the rest declaiming their tag-lines, the poseur Bloch with his ludicrous affectations, the hypocritical snob Legrandin: grotesques pure and simple. A notch up, the sententious diplomat Norpois and his one-time mistress Madame de Villeparisis. Beyond these, the bluff Duc de Guermantes and the ineffable Verdurin couple themselves. At the heights, his most famous creation, where pathos transfigures a comic monster into something closer to, if never altogether becoming, a credible human being, the Baron de Charlus. This gallery does not, of course, exhaust the population of the novel. But characters who escape such treatment pay a penalty: they remain curiously blank. Famously so in the vacant mystery of Albertine, but in large measure true also of Swann and Odette, figures memorable more for their repertoires and accessories, and the stylised roles they play, than for their indistinct persons; of Gilberte, given little more than the red hair and freckles of her childhood; or even, after his initial scenes, monocle dancing in front of him like a butterfly, Saint-Loup. These are not caricatured, but they too lack complexity.

What replaces it in Proust is mutability. In some cases (Swann) infatuation works the change; in others, more often (Odette, Bloch, Madame Verdurin), the shifting tides of snobbery or fashion. In others again, the most striking, it is an abrupt characterological capsizal, lacking any motivation at all: the odious Morel, cowardly deserter one day, gallant patriot the next; the golf-bag ninny Octave late magicked into a distinguished writer;

the vicious lesbian lover of Mlle Vinteuil, co-defiler of her father's image, transformed into the devoted posthumous saviour of his compositions; Saint-Loup, long the impassioned lover of the actress Rachel, overnight a brutish pursuer of men. Most ubiquitous of all is the pattern of which Saint-Loup is the type: the unstoppable revelation of such a high proportion of the dramatis personae of the novel, men and women alike, as addicts of their own sex. 'Inversion', as Proust calls it, sweeps through the ranks of his characters, warping all credibility before it.

Though no admirer of the term realism, Proust was not a fantasist: he was committed to verisimilitude. The distortion it suffers in his work was a product of his own compulsions. At the turn of the century, the upper levels of French society were not as hypocritical or repressive as their counterparts in England. It was nevertheless a notable act of literary courage for Proust to foreground homosexuality in his novel, something no writer had done before. But, caring much for his standing in polite society, he feared scandal if he was identified with it. So his representations of homosexuality could never accord with his actual feelings about it. A sinister light had to fall on it, its adepts depicted as a secret society under a curse, in the biblical cadences of the exordium to its full-scale invasion of the narrative. There, Proust sought to square the circle of social stigma and personal experience, twisting rejection and explanation together in a desperate just-so story of his own: what in classical times was culturally normal had become physically pathological, repugnant if blameless. The strain is all too obvious: the pressure of emotion denied blows its rivet in the longest single sentence – three unbroken pages – of the novel. Inevitably, the bad faith of the construction becomes a filter clouding its optics. Collectively, the return of the repressed breeds the overpopulation of a supposedly medical minority. Individually, it dictates the indeterminacy of the central alter of the story: Albertine, projection of Proust's love for a young man, obliged to acquire the image of a young woman, can never achieve resolution, remaining a vague blur, drained of substance by the prohibition Proust imposed on his creation.

Asexual preference can be lived in any number of ways. Under the social constraints of the time, Proust's version restricted and displaced his range of characterisation. But there was a further handicap from which this suffered. He was a homosexual, but so far as is known – and will be known, until the diaries of the companion of his twenties, Reynaldo Hahn, are published twenty years hence – one who may have been forever unconsummated. Shortly before his death, he told Gide he had loved only men, but never enjoyed physical union with anyone. What is certain is that the only direct report he ever left of sexual pleasure was with himself. His French biographer Tadié's view that 'onanism was always his principal sexual activity' is supported by testimony, grim beyond words, from the male brothel he patronised in his last years. In a novel where, as Bowie puts it, 'sex in a precariously sublimated form' is present throughout, 'recklessly exceeding the requirements of the plot' to a point where it often seems to be 'the enveloping "category of categories"', possessing an 'unlimited range and warrant when it comes to explaining the order of things', such specialisation could scarcely fail to have had consequences for the imaginary of the work. In passing, Bowie remarks that the amatory style of *A la Recherche* is one 'where couples and coupling do indeed point back to a primordial narcissism, an objectless inward rapture', without pausing to consider what this might imply for those represented in it. Intent on the 'relentless desire-drivenness of the novel' (the way 'Proust's versatile comic intelligence dwells with relish upon an outrage, a lack of proportion and right-mindedness inherent in human sexuality'), he is not concerned with its capacity for characterisation. But it was there that narcissism exacted its cost.

Flooding the narrative, total immersion in the self yielded prodigious riches of interior perception and reverie, delivered with continual energy and subtlety. At such a pitch of creative intensity, however, the egoism of Proust's imagination permitted no more than fitful and superficial attention to others. That might have been just a limitation, of the kind to be found in any writer. Proust, however, erected it into a doctrine: the impossibility – not just in his, but in every case – of anyone ever knowing anything of others. Hence the ease with which his characters become their opposites. He once wrote that 'Something repeated ten times is the opposite of art,' and in the novel has his narrator disdainfully declare: 'A work in which there are theories is like an object which still has its price-tag on it.' Yet, of course, *A la recherche* is laden with theories, none more tirelessly repeated than a dogmatics of nescience, the natural epistemology of an artless narcissism. Persons are but 'a shadow

which we can never succeed in penetrating, of which there can be no such thing as direct knowledge'; 'man is a creature that cannot emerge from himself, that knows his fellows only in himself, and if he says the contrary, lies'; 'it is the tragedy of other people that they are to us merely showcases for the perishable collections of our mind': *ad libitum*.1

Obnubilating others as individuals, the doctrine does so in the name of universals. The writer should 'listen to people only when, stupid or absurd as they may have been, they have become, by repeating like parrots what other people of similar character are saying, birds of augury, mouthpieces of a universal law. He remembers only what is general.' As for forms of social intercourse, 'it is superfluous to make a study of manners, since we can deduce them all from psychological laws.' Underlying such pronouncements was a pessimism rooted in Proust's disappointments: the aristocracy, love, friendship had all in different ways failed him. The social world he so ardently courted, and never deserted, had become, by the time he was writing *A la recherche*, 'the realm of nullity'. Sexual desire had never found romantic fulfilment. So passion was not just necessarily unrequited, but founded on a delusion. For since it was a 'law of nature that we live in perfect ignorance of those we love,' the only emotion the self can actually feel is anxiety at not knowing the activities or whereabouts of the other: 'love is what we feel for someone whose actions seem to arouse our jealousy.' So 'how can we have the courage to wish to live, how can we lift a finger to preserve ourselves from death, in a world in which love is provoked by falsehood, and consists merely in our need to see our sufferings appeased by the person who has made us suffer?' Friendship fares no better. In the milieu he frequented, Proust had no real interlocutors, avoiding intellectual equals capable of contesting him. He concluded that for a writer, friendship was nothing less than an 'abdication of the self' that yielded nothing: 'even conversation, which is the mode of expression of friendship, is a superficial digression which gives us no new acquisition.' Yet one more 'indication of the unreality of others', friendship could only be 'a simulacrum' – 'our friends being friends only in the agreeable folly that accompanies us through life, and to which we lend ourselves, but which at the deepest level we know well to be the delusion of one who talks to furniture because he believes it is alive.' With axioms like these, the final apodictic judgment follows: 'After failure in every quarter of the domain of life and action, it is a mental incapacity for happiness that nature creates in us. The phenomenon of happiness either fails to appear or gives way to the bitterest of reactions'; virtually its only function is to make 'the valuable agony called unhappiness possible'.

Valuable because 'suffering is the best thing one can encounter in life,' since it alone gives that sight of 'the whole law-governed immensity' which is the condition of literature, and 'true life, life at last laid bare and illuminated – the only life in consequence which can be said to be fully lived – is literature.' More, if 'sorrows are the servants, obscure and detested, against whom one struggles, beneath whose dominion one more and more completely falls, servants implacable and irreplaceable who by subterranean pathways lead us to truth and death', it is only they who permit the final triumph of truth over death. 'The cruel law of art is that people die and we ourselves die after exhausting every form of suffering, so that over our heads may grow the grass not of oblivion but of eternal life, the vigorous and luxuriant growth of a true work of art, and so that thither, gaily and without a thought for those who are sleeping beneath them, future generations may come to enjoy their *déjeuner sur l'herbe*.' The consolations of the age had never received such magnificent expression. But such they remained. In England, by the time of Arnold, salvation by art was already the conventional intellectual substitute for faith. In France, Thibaudet would observe in 1926: 'The 19th century began, with Chateaubriand, in the poetry of religion. It ended, with Mallarmé and his disciples, in a religion of poetry.' Proust was at odds with both Mallarmé, for culpable obscurity, and Thibaudet, for daring to point out weaknesses in Flaubert, but the cap fitted. Chateaubriand and Nerval, as he often explained, were his primary literary inspirations, and the cadences of his novel famously resemble poetry, culminating in the most famous of all professions of the redemptive vocation of art. There, as Genette would write, it 'parts company with the tradition of the Bildungsroman and approaches certain forms of religious literature', for 'the narrator does not simply know *more*, empirically, than the hero; he *knows* in the absolute sense, he understands the Truth.'2 At this deepest level of his sensibility, Proust was a late Romantic.

That left its mark in the moral landscape of his novel, opinions and characters polarised into ways close, as Edmund Wilson noticed, to the good and evil valences of melodrama. In one register, there is Morel: 'a vile nature who would not shrink from any act of meanness' – typically so, for in that 'he resembled the majority of mankind.' Indeed there is scarcely anyone the narrator encounters after his childhood in Combray who is not in

one fashion or another tainted or degraded: cruelty, hypocrisy, mendacity, greed, pretension, selfishness are all but universal. At its opposite, we are told, no less sweepingly, that 'it is not good sense that is "the commonest thing in the world", but human kindness. In the most remote, most desolate ends of the earth, we marvel to see it blossom of its own accord.' The four pages that follow retail one disobliging or unattractive human characteristic after another. But Proust can readily return to the charge: 'Kindness, a simple process of maturation which in the end sweetens characters originally more acid even than that of Bloch, is as widespread as that belief in justice which, if our cause is good, makes us no more fear a hostile than a friendly judge.' Fine words. In practice, warmth and compassion are to be found only in the narrator's family circle, above all his mother and grandmother – that 'race from Combray, from which sprang human beings absolutely unspoilt', seemingly now 'almost extinct'. The shabbiness or villainy of the world beyond it is not entire. Ethically, Proust will occasionally stitch a silver lining into his persons: Verdurin is capable of an unexpected act of charity, his wife is a genuine lover of the arts, deep down Charlus is naturally good, Bloch could sometimes be nice, and so on. But the mitigations are nominal: they have no narrative weight. Rather, like the transformations of Morel or Saint-Loup, they come from the fictional plasticine out of which Proust peopled his world. The only real changes *A la recherche* records come from the rotations of fashion and the talons of ageing.

The design of *A Dance to the Music of Time* is altogether distinct. Powell was a teenager when the First World War ended, and a student as *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses* and Scott Moncrieff's translation of *A la recherche* detonated in its aftermath. The combination of moral caesura and literary revolution marked a divide that Proust, though he would contribute to it, had never known. 'This "age-gap" of the 1920s was a chasm to make all subsequent ones of its sort seem inconsiderable,' Powell wrote in his memoirs. A product of it, he was bound to be acutely conscious of the temporality that had so largely passed Proust by. Time in *A la recherche* has two registers: psychological and biological. There are references to political or cultural events, but they feature only as incidents in the persiflage of the salons, without bearing on the action; even the Dreyfus Affair simply illustrates the frivolity of the chameleons who frequent them. In *A Dance* too, time is existential as Proust conceived it – memory and mortality – but it is also fully historical, recording changes in outlooks, customs, institutions, alternating periods of war and peace, across half a century, each decade sharply delineated. Sarajevo, Versailles, Depression; Abdication, Spanish Civil War, Munich; Home, Western and Eastern Fronts in the Second World War; Austerity, Cold War, counterculture – these don't just supply backdrops or atmospherics. Determining actions, entanglements, destinies, they orchestrate the narrative.

Like Proust, in all but the affair of Swann and Odette, Powell chose a first-person form. It is a common complaint that in doing so, he went to the opposite extreme, creating a narrator not all-engulfing, but so neutral and self-effacing, spectator rather than participant in the story, that the effect is to lower the emotional voltage of the novel. This is a misconception. The personality of Nicholas Jenkins is inseparable from its power. By no means a Lockwood or Marlow, or even – perhaps the nearest, if still quite distant, precedent – Nick Carraway, he is fully present as the actor on whom the story is centred in the first four instalments of *A Dance,* which form a classic Bildungsroman embedded in the larger architecture of the series: tracing his path from innocence to adulthood, through discovery of the intermittences of friendship, the pull of money and the tricks of desire, circles of society old, new and offbeat, demonstrations of the will and misadventures of the heart. The third volume is even canonically entitled *The Acceptance World*, though the classic resolution of the genre does not arrive till marriage in the fourth, before the fifth and sixth undo any generalisation of it, amid the wreckage of the wedded state among friends, and the revelations of death and betrayal. With the seventh, eighth and ninth volumes, the subjectivity of the narrator returns front stage, with Jenkins the soldier journeying from regimental through staff to war office experience. Only in the final three postwar volumes, which cover the period when Powell was writing the novel, does he withdraw Jenkins to the position of essentially an onlooker. Prior to these, a wide palette of feelings is at work. The narrator is scarcely a cipher. Bemused, elated, ashamed; jealous, embarrassed, lonely; desiring, priggish, maladroit; furious, in despair; in tears, in love: at one point or another he is all of these. Defining the tone of the novel, however, is the reflective cast of his mind, in certain respects recalling that of Proust's narrator, yet also markedly different from it.

Powell thought passionate interest in oneself – not self-interest, or mere selfishness – unusual: 'True interest in yourself is comparatively rare, sharply to be differentiated from mere egotism and selfishness; characteristics often immoderately developed in persons not in the least interested in themselves intellectually or objectively.' It was something Proust possessed, and he lacked. He could have added that comprehensive interest in others –

a fully engaged, impartial curiosity – is even rarer. That, like perhaps no other writer, he had. Precise calculations differ, but if we take Kilmartin's *Guide to Proust* and Spurling's *Invitation to the Dance* as benchmarks, Proust's novel contains more than three hundred, Powell's some four hundred characters.3 The only work to bear artistic comparison with them, Cao Xueqin's great *Dream of the Red Chamber*, approaches five hundred. In each case, of course, a distinction has to be made between actors and extras – *figurants* who appear only once, or rate simply a mention. The ratio of the first to the second is 0.89:1 in Proust, 1.46:1 in Powell – a considerable difference. More extras than actors in *A la recherche*, more actors than extras in *A Dance*. Of the extras in Proust, nearly half are so class-marked – the lift-boy, the gardener, the laundry girl – they don't earn so much as a name. In other words, the 'character-space' of the two works, to use the term coined by Alex Woloch in his pioneering study of the relationship between major and minor figures in the novel, *The One v. the Many*, is quite distinct. Powell's is demographically much richer. If we reckon that, fictionally speaking, the critical measure is not the number of persons who cross the stage of a novel, but those who can be said to occupy it for any space of time, *A Dance* contains about twice as many main characters, on either a broad or a narrow definition, as *A la recherche*.

Quantity is one thing, quality another. There Powell stands alone. Traditionally, masters of characterisation – Balzac, Eliot, James – were omniscient, describing their creations both from without and within: representing their thoughts and feelings as freely as their carriage or clothes, if typically according one subject-position within the novel, the hero or heroine, the central point of view on the tale, recounted in the third person. Proust took the alternative of a first-person narrative, nearly as canonical since the time of Constant or Charlotte Brontë, to lengths never attempted before, if also without overmuch coherence: the narrator not only reports Swann in the third person, but assumes on occasion an impossible omniscience in the first person. By the time Powell started to write, the interior monologue – Dujardin, Joyce, Woolf – had overtaken authorial omniscience, as superior in depth and less suspect of artifice, while Hemingway was dispensing with both, for pure exteriority of speech and action. The early, prewar Powell modelled himself on Hemingway, producing terse third-person narratives with deliberately flat characters. The enormous change he made in writing *A Dance* was to switch to a first-person narrative that retained most of the restraints of this mode – that is, no direct psychological access to the inner life of the other characters – while giving them, with unique economy, the presence and depth of figures from the expansive tradition of old, that allowed itself every facility of purchase in its portraiture.

Powell employed four principal means in bringing his characters to life, each offering an instructive contrast with Proust's. The first was his gift of physical depiction, the classic introduction to them. Here is the way the best friend, in early days, of the two narrators are described. Saint-Loup:

> Along the central gangway leading inland from the beach to the high road I saw tall, slender, his neck uncovered, his proud head held high, a young man go past with searching eyes, whose skin was as fair and his hair as golden as if they had absorbed all the rays of the sun. Dressed in a loose, almost white apparel such as I could never have believed any man could wear ... His eyes, from which a monocle kept dropping, were the colour of the sea. Everyone looked at him with interest.

Stringham:

> He was tall and dark, and looked a little like one of those stiff, sad young men in ruffs, whose long legs take up so much room in 16th-century portraits; or perhaps a younger – and far slighter – version of Veronese's Alexander receiving the children of Darius after the battle of Issus: with the same high forehead and suggestion of hair thinning a bit at the temples. His features certainly seemed to belong to that epoch of painting: the faces in Elizabethan miniatures, lively, obstinate, generous, not very happy and quite relentless.

Proust's vision is little more than romantic schmaltz of the period: 'golden' (applied in due course interminably to features of the Guermantes clan as a whole), is merely a vacant signifier for glamour; 'the colour of the sea' is meaningless – it can be grey, blue, brown, green. Powell delivers an image of indelible precision and detail.

Conversation typically comes next as a marker. A quarter of *A la recherche* is made up of dialogue; a half of *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Speech in Proust is generally entertaining – it is where his comic gifts are concentrated – but it is a crude instrument of individuation, since it relies so much on parody. Bloch, Legrandin or Saniette speak distinctively enough, but as objects of the stylised ridicule of cartoons. Talk in the Guermantes or other aristocratic salons, unlike the Verdurin household, is not guyed in the same way, but it is uninflected, the company maintaining much the same worldly tone, with at best some sidelong sparring between the ducal pair; Charlus alone is accorded some wonderful harangues, courting without collapsing into burlesque. Perhaps most conspicuous is the absence of exchange where the narrator is concerned. As a critic noted in the *Nouvelle Revue française* early on, no one is truly allowed to answer him. Albertine may protest, but no real argument ensues. Françoise, essentially a stock figure of the faithful servant given to grumbling, with a strong sense of proper hierarchies, can issue a rebuke to her employer, moved by dislike for Albertine. But when she does so – an illiterate countrywoman – Proust cannot resist the parodic impulse, and has her addressing him in a sentence of high-flown Marcelese length and orotundity:

'To be sure, you yourself are kind, and I shall never forget the debt of gratitude I owe you, but the house has become a plague-spot now that kindness has installed trickery within it, now that intelligence protects the stupidest creature ever seen, now that refinement, good manners, wit, dignity in everything, a real and visible prince, lets vice – everything that is vulgar and low – lay down the law, hatch its plots, and humiliate me, I who have been in the service of this family for forty years.'

Powell was immune to this kind of ineptness. With an extraordinary ear for spoken language, he created defining ways of talking for character after character, across a wide gamut of diction, without any need to resort to verbal tags or inflation. Templer and Duport, Mona and Quiggin, Mrs Erdleigh and Mr Deacon, General Conyers and Lady Molly, not to speak of Widmerpool or Stringham, speak in expressive voices that, even at the more exotic end of the spectrum, never strain belief; in more vernacular idiom, the exchanges between Albert, Billson and Bracey at Stonehurst have little in common with the mannerisms of service at Combray. Dialogue here is not just illustrative, as conversation so often is in Proust, it is concomitant with action. Of that, there is very little in *A la recherche*, whose narrative proceeds for long stretches without it. Acts indicative of characters are few and far between: sometimes just minimal gestures like the careless abandon of Albertine's opening jump over a beachcomber at Balbec, or the chivalry of Saint-Loup's acrobatic navigation of banquettes to confer his coat on the narrator in a restaurant in Paris. For more significant scenes, we are left with incidents of a wilful childhood and episodes towards the end of the novel: Swann ditched by the Guermantes, Charlus humiliated by Morel at the instigation of the Verdurins, Albertine's decision to decamp. There is nothing comparable to Powell's cannonade of symptomatic actions prepared or recollected in dialogue, from the opening shots of Uncle Giles's intrusion at Jenkins's school and Stringham's impersonation of Le Bas onwards: Templer showing off his roadster, Donners displaying his dungeon, Mona summoning Quiggin, Moreland's rescue mission to Maclintick, Conyers's handling of Billson, Duport's dealings with Jenkins, Bithel's choreographic turning of the tables, Stringham's refusal of prewar connections, and so on. In a typical passage of Powell's high comedy – far from his only register – here is Widmerpool, newly engaged, explaining what is on his mind, and Jenkins's reactions, in a conversation preparing the dénouement of *At Lady Molly's*. The year is 1935.

He began to speak hurriedly again, the words tumbling out as if he wished to finish with this speech as quickly as possible. 'I should not wish to appear backward in display of affection,' he said, developing an increased speed with every phrase, 'and, in addition to that, I don't see why we should delay unduly the state in which we shall have to spend the rest of our life merely because certain legal and religious formalities take time to arrange. In short, Nicholas, you will, I am sure, agree – more especially as you seem to spend a good deal of

your time with artists and film-makers and people of that sort, whose morals are proverbial – that it would be permissible on my part to suppose – once the day of the wedding has been fixed – that we might – occasionally enjoy each other's company – say over a weekend –.'

He came to a sudden stop, looking at me rather wildly.

'I don't see why not.' It was impossible to guess what he was going to say next. This was all far from anything for which I had been prepared.

'In fact, my fiancée – Mildred, that is – might even expect such a suggestion?'

'Well, yes, from what you say.'

'Might even regard it as *usage du monde*?'
'Quite possible.'

Then Widmerpool sniggered. For some reason, I was conscious of embarrassment, even of annoyance. The problem could be treated, as it were, clinically, or humorously; a combination of the two approaches was distasteful. I had the impression that the question of how he should behave worried him more on account of the figure he cut in the eyes of Mrs Haycock than because his passion could not be curbed.

In evoking personality, to physiognomies, declarations and actions, Powell added one of his trademarks, succinct encapsulations. Here is Sonny Farebrother, at first (1922) and then subsequent (1943) sight:

There was a suggestion of boyishness – the word 'sunny' would certainly be applicable – about his frank manner; but, in spite of this manifest desire to get along with everyone on their own terms, there was also something lonely and inaccessible about him.

He bestowed around him a sense of smoothness, ineffable, unstemmable smoothness, like oil flowing ever so gently from the spout of a vessel perfectly regulated by its pourer, soft lubricating fluid, gradually, but irresistibly, spreading; and spreading, let it be said, over an unexpectedly wide, even a vast area.

Dicky Umfraville:

Trim, horsey, perfectly at ease with himself, and everyone around him, he managed at the same time to suggest the proximity of an abyss of scandal and bankruptcy threatening at any moment to engulf himself, and anyone else unfortunate enough to be in his vicinity when the crash came. The charm he exercised over people was perhaps largely due to this ability to juggle two, contrasting, apparently contradictory attributes; the one, an underlying implication of sinister, disturbing undercurrents; the other, a soothing power to reassure and entertain. These incompatible elements were always felt to be warring with each other whenever he was present. He was like an actor who suddenly appears on stage to the accompaniment of a roll of thunder, yet who utterly captivates his audience a second later, while their nerves are still on edge, by crooning a sentimental song.

Pamela Flitton, in 1943 and 1953:

Iciness of manner remained complete. She was perhaps not altogether normal, what Borrit called ‘a bit off the beam’. There was no denying she was a striking girl to look at. Many men would find this cosmic rage with life, as it seemed to be, an added attraction.

The violent antithesis presented by their contrasted forms of existence [husband and lover], unique specimens as it were brought into collision, promised anarchic extremities of feeling of the kind at which she aimed; in which she was principally at home. She liked – to borrow a phrase from St John Clarke, to ‘try conclusions with the maelstrom’.

There are echoes of Proust in certain characters in Powell. Uncle Giles’s description of himself as ‘a bit of a radical’ is a repetition of the claim Legrandin awards himself; Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson’s letter to the *Times* invokes the adage beloved of M. de Norpois, ‘the dogs bark, the caravan moves on.’4 The first pair are both poseurs with a grudge, the second both sententious diplomats. But as to portraits (much the same could be said of, say, Quiggin and Bloch), there is no comparison. Powell’s are much subtler, more complex. The contrast becomes still sharper in characters more central to the narrative. It is enough to match Stringham against Saint-Loup, not just at first sight, but across their respective unfolding; the enigmatic plenitude of Jean against the empty riddles of Albertine; Widmerpool against Charlus as comic monsters. Characterisation here is never static, but Powell handles change in a way quite unlike Proust, not as precipitous moral volte-faces, or mere physical deliquescence, but as gradual evolution or revelation, across a carefully calibrated sequence of situations and actions. Widmerpool’s mutation as he alters from ridiculed schoolboy to humiliated suitor, capable but still absurd *Streber* in business and the City, ruthless wartime colonel and high-level military intriguer, Labour MP and ennobled fellow-traveller, to his downfall in the Cold War and descent into an occult netherworld, is an organic process: from the laughable to the malignant to the abject. Charlus simply shrinks into himself, *tel qu’en lui-même le sénilité le change.*

Powell’s social range is, of course, much wider too. The aristocracy certainly provides its quota to *A Dance*, either by repute or in person: Bridgnorth, Huntercombe, Warminster, Aberavon, Seaford and assorted offspring, especially the Stepneys and Tollands. Not invested with any special aura, they are no cause for any particular disappointment. As in Proust, there are painters, writers and musicians, actors, scholars and critics, though these inhabit bohemian or academic purlieus not to be found in *A la recherche*; servants are more disturbed, truculent, melancholic in Powell; but – the critical difference – there are also businessmen, politicians, soldiers, publishers, journalists, bureaucrats, adventurers, mages and misfits: a company beyond Proustian ken. The spirit in which this landscape is treated finds famous expression in Powell’s maxim: ‘All human beings, driven as they are at different speeds by the same Furies, are at close range equally extraordinary.’ Dwelling on the even play of curiosity that followed from it, Ferdinand Mount, who has written notably well about his uncle, remarks that so far from being snobbish, as often charged, ‘his fiction is extraordinarily democratic in a way few other writers of his time could claim.’

The judgment is carefully formulated and can be upheld, with two provisos. Powell’s world is certainly larger than that of any of his contemporaries. But it has a frontier: other than miners conscripted as soldiers, represented as soldiers rather than miners, likewise bank clerks, it doesn’t contain workers or figures from the lower middle class, the majority of the population in most of the period covered by the narrative. His class background didn’t in itself preclude this – Henry Green, a close friend at Eton and Oxford, built novels around them – but his personal trajectory, with the exception of regimental service, did. No writer has ever produced a successful encyclopedia of the society in which they lived, Zola coming nearest, all experiences of life limiting imagination in one way or another. What holds good is the variety of Powell’s world, and the equity in his inventory of it: both indeed unequalled in his time, or since.

The equity is not absolute. If only by implication, Mount overstates it in one significant respect. Women, who lend as much colour to the story as men, are handled differently. Throughout, the narrator refers to all men, even close friends, by their surnames (Barnby, Moreland, Pennistone); all women of his own generation, the majority, by their first names (Barbara, Gypsy, Priscilla); those of an older generation, much fewer, by surnames distanced with honorifics (Madame Leroy, Miss Weedon, Mrs Erdleigh); only a servant features, pre-First World War style, with a surname alone: Billson. The contrast in Jenkins's own cohort does not denominate greater intimacy with the opposite sex, but the reverse. Its visual equivalent is the asymmetry with which the appearances of men and women are described. Jenkins, like most of the male characters, certainly appreciates looks in women, on which they all comment freely. But compared to the precision with which men are depicted, these remain on the whole curiously undefined, reduced to vague or generic categories; 'willowy', 'fierce', 'striking', 'tolerable', 'a beauty' and so forth. Here is a married couple encountered early on in Jenkins's cursus, Buster and Amy Foxe, mother and stepfather of Stringham:

Buster was standing beside this urn, cleaning a cigarette-holder with the end of a matchstick. He was tall, and at once struck me as surprisingly young; with the slightly drawn expression that one recognises in later life as the face of a man who does himself pretty well, while not ceasing to take plenty of exercise. His turn-out was emphatically excellent, and he diffused waves of personality, strong, chilling gusts of icy air, a protective element that threatened to freeze into rigidity all who came through the door, before they could approach him nearer.

'Hullo, you fellows,' he said, without looking up from his cigarette-holder, at which he appeared to be sneering, as if this object was not nearly valuable enough to presume to belong to him ...
A moment or two later his mother appeared. I thought her tremendously beautiful: though smaller than the photograph in Stringham's room had suggested. Still wearing a hat, she had just come into the house.

The disproportion is in no way a reflection of the respective importance of the two in the narrative, rather the opposite: Amy effortlessly controls her husband and is of significantly more moment to the story. Even where Powell's gifts are most engaged, characteristically mobilising the arts to his effects, when Jenkins falls in and eventually out of love with Jean Templer, the result is blurred. First sighting, 1923:

Like her legs, her face was thin and attenuated, the whole appearance given the effect of a much simplified – and somewhat self-conscious – arrangement of lines and planes: such as might be found in an Old Master drawing, Flemish or German perhaps, depicting some young and virginal saint; the racquet, held awkwardly at an angle to her body, suggesting at the same time an obscure implement associated with martyrdom. The expression of her face, though sad and a trifle ironical, was not altogether in keeping with this air of belonging to another and better world.

Second meeting, 1928:

She still seemed slim, attenuated, perhaps not exactly a 'beauty'; but, all the same, still in some way mysterious and absorbing to me, just as she seemed when I visited the Templers after leaving school. There was perhaps a touch of the trim secretary of musical comedy.

Two or three hours later:

She reminded me of some picture. Was it Rubens and *Le Chapeau de paille*: his second wife or her sister? There was that same suggestion, though only for an instant, of shyness and submission.

In 1932:

Once she had reminded me of Rubens's *Chapeau de paille*. Now for some reason – though there was not much physical likeness between them – I thought of the woman smoking the hookah in Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*. Perhaps there was something of the odalisque about Jean, too. She looked pale and rather tired.

In 1945:

It was as if the mother was someone different; the daughter, the remembered Jean. About seventeen or eighteen, Polly Duport was certainly a very pretty girl; prettier, so far as that went, than her mother at the same age. Jean's attraction in those days had been other than mere prettiness.

In 1971:

She was now altogether transformed into a foreign lady of distinction. The phrase 'sad Goya duchess' did not at all overstate the case.

Each vivid enough in itself, the multiplication yields no cogent physical image: Rogier Van der Weyden, Noël Coward, Rubens, Delacroix, Goya cancel one another out. Can the sequence be justified as the impress on the narrator's perceptions of someone essentially elusive, across successive conflicting emotions and the passage of time? Perhaps. But the indeterminacy also speaks to a larger question.

In the morning after the night when Jean materialises unforeseen at the Ritz and they become lovers, Jenkins recollects an argument with Barnby about the way women are pictured in novels, in the course of which he remarks: 'No real tradition of how women behave exists in English writing.' In an interview, Powell himself went further: 'Females are very hard to do. I don't think any male writer has ever done one right.' As such, the notion makes no sense: where would James figure in it? But the view that 'women are terribly, terribly difficult' to depict well confesses a gradient in the portraits in his own novel, where few achieve the full-length treatment accorded male protagonists, requiring analytic reflection of a kind the narrator can never bring stably to bear, for example, on Jean. The principal exception is Pamela Flitton, whose sexual nihilism is examined with a sombre power transcending the conventions of the femme fatale, a type anyway a historical anachronism by the time of the narrative. That she is in this respect *hors série* has led some to tax Powell with an underlying misogyny. Nothing in the novel speaks to this. Both of the women who figure as the worst news for men, Audrey and Pamela (Xanthippe and Circe), achieve a kind of atonement in unexpected turns to care or sacrifice, tropes here bent out of true by the disconcerting form they take. On the other side of the gender divide, no such alleviation attaches to Widmerpool or other brutish male specimens.
In 20th-century literature, prejudicial treatment of women can take two forms, which of course may be combined. Are they disliked? Are they slighted? The first, misogyny strictly speaking, is rarer than the second, male chauvinism, and where it exists typically generates much cruder kinds of disparagement. The asymmetry in Powell's handling of the sexes is free of hostility to women. It is not their presence, but their absence that arouses vehemence of feeling: 'the excruciating boredom of exclusively male society' of which the narrator complains in the army. Arguably the warmest single portrait of anyone in *A Dance to the Music of Time* is of Molly Jeavons, in the disorderly kindness and disregard of convention in her cross-class household. Marriage, a state understandably of little interest to Proust, who vouchsafes scarcely a thought about it, but still in Powell's time central to relations between the sexes, forms one of the leading topics of *A Dance.* Few avoid misfortune

there, with scenes of conjugal discord among the most wrenching pages in the novel. Significantly, it is not a man, but a woman – Moreland's wife, Matilda, one of Powell's most sympathetic characters – who gives most eloquent expression to what marriage is likely to mean for either sex, in an outburst rare for use of italics: 'Is it fun to be married to anyone?' she asks, and continues passionately: 'I mean *married* to someone. Not to sleep with them, or talk to them, or go about with them. To be *married* to them.'

Women can be liked but all the same belittled, tacitly if not explicitly. Impossible with such variously commanding figures as Madame Leroy, Miss Weedon and Mrs Erdleigh, could it be said of the narrator's contemporaries? For Isabelle Joyau, most of his female characters – besides such older ones, she instances six of his own generation – are 'startlingly tough'. That may be, critics can reply, but as James Tucker, still his best English reader, remarked in *The Novels of Anthony Powell* (1976), none is shown discussing, joking, intriguing or speaking about art, politics, literature or money in the style of men. Morally and practically speaking, they give as good as they get, if not better: but professionally or intellectually? The only jobs ascribed to the prewar lot are model and actress. Postwar this alters: in the final trilogy, Ada Leintwardine, successful novelist, is capable of trumping or outmanoeuvring any of the literary figures around her; and no one else in the novel comes near the erudite firepower of Emily Brightman, sprightly historian of late antiquity. Powell was a product of his class and period, with the blindspots these imply, but changes in gender roles were not lost on him. The notion of any particular sexism doesn't stick. Spurling's love of his work is scarcely an eccentricity: women have been among its greatest admirers.

That this should be so is also a natural response to the structure of the work, capable of impartially attracting any reader. Rather bafflingly, Powell disavowed much skill with plot, to all appearance not out of false modesty, saying he was bad at a side of novel construction to which he has owed many fans. How in fact he planned the intricate architecture of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, with its huge cast of characters across a dozen volumes, remains something of a mystery. It is not clear if at the beginning he envisaged even more than three, and certain that he claimed not to have decided on 12 till he had reached six. Yet in the very first, Stringham says laughing of Widmerpool, 'that boy will be the death of me,' which he coldly becomes in the eighth; while in the same opening volume Widmerpool, peering over a hedge at the discomfiture of Le Bas engineered by Stringham, is – viewed retrospectively – *in petto* already the voyeur he turns out to be in the 11th; Sunny Farebrother, said by Jenkins to disappear from his life for twenty years after impressing him as a teenager, resurfaces punctually seven volumes later; Pamela Flitton makes her entry in the second volume as a bridesmaid of about six or seven vomiting into a baptismal font at her uncle's wedding, before hitting assorted military careers like a meteorite in the ninth, and repeating her eructations in a large Chinese urn in the tenth. Such precision of long-range balletics is very rare, perhaps unique. It unfolds within a structure in which each of the 12 volumes has its own self-contained plot, built of five or so episodes separated by intervals, within the overall narrative. Openings are typically meditative, passages of controlled, often ironic reverie; endings alternating between deadpan or wry deflation of previous intensities of emotion or action, and bleak registration or stoical foreboding of events and the passage of the time. In between, the dramas dominating the narrative are formed by social juxtapositions of one kind or another: visits, receptions, parties, meals, weddings, drinks, soirées, exhibitions – a much wider variety than in Proust, where dinners and receptions occupy a third of the novel, but with the same set pieces in large gatherings. Parties in *A la recherche* roll on for well over a hundred pages apiece. More concise, Powell's certainly owe something to Proust's example, but are closer to the art of Dostoevsky, whose *Possessed* he regarded as perhaps the greatest of all novels.

What Dostoevsky invented were scenes of polite society where antagonistic emotions explode the conventions of the occasion in comic outrage and social scandal, no less potentially tragic for that. Not simply expressive, they are performative, culminating in deeds as well as words. Such too are the set pieces in *A Dance*: the successive exits of Stringham and Mr Deacon, followed by the disparate volley of her curses, from Milly Andriadis's party in Mayfair; the apotheosis of an alcoholic Stringham, transfixing listeners at his mother's reception for Moreland, and his chilling captivity that ensues, followed by the suicide of one of his audience; the panic-stricken flight of Templer's second wife, soon to descend into an asylum, from a too suggestive tableau vivant after dinner at the castellar residence of Sir Magnus Donners; the climactic nocturnal confrontation between Pamela and Widmerpool, amid a throng of other interested parties, after a private performance of *Il Seraglio* in Regent's Park. Scenes, mutatis mutandis, all worthy of *The Idiot*.

A recurrent motif at these and other key moments of the novel is the role of the physical mishap as precipitant of events, one of the most distinctive features of Powell's imagination, figuring the casual emblems of contingency in life. These can function as comic slapstick: the misaimed banana that splatters on Widmerpool's face, the sugar castor that accidentally opens over his head; or more ambiguously, the untied shoelace by a barred window on a medieval staircase that freezes the narrator into a vision of Widmerpool as a prisoner behind the grill, then as a bureaucrat glaring through his *guichet*, each time revealing another aspect of him. But equally as dramatic device: triggers of break-up, trailers for downfall, conditions for scandal – the jostling of a girl on a passenger's knee that causes Templer to drive his car into the ditch, severing his friendship with Stringham; the jamming of the door as Mr Deacon tries to negotiate it with bundled sheets of *War Never Pays!* cascading from under his arm, in ignominious exit from Milly Andriadis's party, prelude to his death from injuries sustained falling down the stairs of a seedy club not long after; a chauffeur's confusion between a Terrace, a Place and a Gate of the same name, delaying the limousine whose arrival would have averted the terminal fracas between Pamela and Widmerpool among the guests on the pavement in Regent's Park. It may even have been a bump in the asphalt that throws Jenkins and Jean into each other's arms on the Great West Road.

The 12 plots within the plot that comprise *A Dance to the Music of Time* each contain a crescendo of complex feeling, typically but not invariably towards the end of the volume: Stringham's signal to the narrator of a parting of the ways in *A Question of Upbringing*; the narrator's dream-like intercourse with Gypsy Jones ('there was something odious about her that made her, at the same time – I had to face this – an object of desire') after Mr Deacon's funeral in *A Buyer's Market*; Widmerpool's assertion of authority over Stringham at his alcoholic collapse after the Old Boy dinner where Le Bas is taken ill in *The Acceptance World*; the narrator's *coup de foudre* and prevision of his marriage in *At Lady Molly's*; Maclintick's suicide in *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*; the revelation of Jean's passages with not just one but two of the figures most despised by the narrator ('perhaps, I thought, her men are gothic too, beings carved on the niches and corbels of a medieval cathedral to arouse at once laughter and horror. In any case, I had been one of them. If they were horrifying, I too had been of their order. That had to be admitted'), with news of the Nazi-Soviet Pact the next morning announcing that war was at hand in *The Kindly Ones*; Gwatkin's loss of his command in *The Valley of Bones*; the awkward *chasse-croisés* at the Café Royal during the Blitz and the deaths that follow it, the punishment of Bithel and Stringham's posting to what will be his end in Singapore in *The Soldier's Art*; Pamela's public accusation of Widmerpool as murderer of Templer in *The Military Philosophers*; Trapnel's discovery of Pamela's abandonment of him and destruction of his novel in *Books Do Furnish a Room*; her gift of her death to Gwinnett in *Temporary Kings*; Widmerpool's demise in *Hearing Secret Harmonies*.

The issues in such episodes, when the emotional register is suddenly heightened, are humiliation, betrayal, friendship, love and death. However pointed, pathos is always kept tightly under control. Typically, Powell will put a gap between the event and the narrator, employing third-party accounts rather than direct report to describe them. These can be quite circumstantial – Jean's shuttle between lovers in South America, Trapnel's final night of inebriated glory in a pub, Widmerpool's crazed chanting to his woodland end – and in a few cases the narrator is on the spot either shortly or before or just after the event (Maclintick's turning on the gas, the bomb that hits Lady Molly's), lending it peculiar immediacy. But often tragic or lurid events – the killing of Templer by partisans in the Balkans, of Stringham in captivity in Malaya, the sacrifice of Pamela in a sordid hostelry – occur off-stage, particulars withheld. The distancing devices increase in number and effect as the narrative lengthens. In part, this is a natural consequence of the way the narrator is decentred once past the threshold of marriage. But it also corresponds to the tonal parabola of *A Dance*. Association of its curve with spring, summer, autumn and winter is contested by some, though its last words certainly allude to the seasons. What is undeniable, however, and insufficiently emphasised, is the buoyant – if certainly also often ironic – sense of adventure and high spirits of the first four volumes of the sequence, in the comedy of youthful discovery of life; touches of darkening as the war approaches; with it, the coming of austerity and tragedy; final descent into the realms of the macabre. As a turn to ever more extreme actions and situations unfolds, in a shift resembling that in Proust, whose example may have licensed Powell's imagination for it, the requirement for buffering procedures steadily mounts, till by the end nearly all is elaborate – often even, with a further twist, speculative or dubitative – *oratio obliqua*.

Stylistically speaking, Powell is the very unusual case of a writer who radically changed his way of writing midway through life. He himself made light of the difference between his quartet of prewar novels and the postwar sequence, preferring to present his work as a more or less continuous development, and on the whole his admirers have followed him in this. In reality, it is hard to think of any other novelist where the formal contrast is so marked. Hemingway was the principal influence on Powell's prewar writing, along with E.E. Cummings and Wyndham Lewis: clipped sentences, terse dialogue, deadpan affect. Late in life he would dismiss Hemingway's prose with a telling epithet – 'muscle-bound'– and find much of *Farewell to Arms* 'terrible stuff'. But, at the time, he sought to repurpose its techniques for interwar English comedy. The results were not particularly high wattage. The verdicts of Koyama Taichi, in *The Novels of Anthony Powell: A Critical Study* (2006), comparing them with Waugh's output in the same period, are brisk. Similarities abound – *Decline and Fall: Afternoon Men* ('the merry-go-round of manners'); *Black Mischief: Venusberg* ('topsy-turvy in a foreign land'); *Vile Bodies: Agents and Patients* ('satire of the fast set'); *A Handful of Dust: From a View to a Death* ('the country house is falling down'); *Scoop: What's Become of Waring?* ('the dinginess of hacks') – but Powell lacks the gusto of Waugh's 'wild, grotesque flights of the imagination', his energy-saving variants yielding no more than a 'light, prosperous disdain for the sordid affairs of the world'. That could be thought too harsh. But Koyama is perfectly correct in pointing out the most striking feature of the early novels. They contain, virtually without exception, only flat characters.

The First World War, although it impinged on him directly very little, altered Proust's enterprise decisively, suspension of publication after the first volume in 1913 extending what would have been a trilogy into six more volumes when it was resumed in 1919. The effect of the Second World War on Powell was more drastically transformative. He emerged from it, he said, a different person. Unable to compose any fiction in the army, he immersed himself in the writings, familiar and obscure, of the 17th century, with a view to producing the biography of John Aubrey that became his first book after the war. The impact of what he would term Aubrey's 'new sort of sensibility' proved critical, with Powell taking from it both his 'appreciation of the oddness of the individual human being' and 'mastery of the ideal phrase for describing people'. The lapidary side of *A Dance* owes quite a bit to this. At the same time, a more general steeping in 17th-century prose that – especially in generations formed before the Civil War: for Powell, conspicuously Robert Burton – was modally baroque left its mark too.

Out of this frequentation with forms of writing prior to Augustan normalisation, and a much wider range of wartime and postwar reading, not just in English literature, Powell developed a style as unlike his prewar fiction as the characters of *The Acceptance World* are from the matchstick figures of *Afternoon Men*: combining formal elegance with colloquial energy, brilliant descriptive passages with abrupt analytic reflections, elastic clauses and sparing connectives, a prose uniquely at once alembicated and taut. Powell's sentences are nowhere near the length or complication of Proust's, which average 35 words apiece, and his imagery, vivid enough in its own right, does not compare with the poetic and scientific range or density of Proust's. His art is more laconic. Counterintuitively, English has a more Latinate syntax than French, a single verb able to control a sequence of clauses where French requires cumbersome repetitions; it also allows participial constructions barred or reproved in French. Powell made extensive use of both possibilities, especially the latter, making an English equivalent of the Latin ablative absolute one of the trademarks of his style, with sovereign indifference to schoolroom objections to the pendant participle. English also, of course, has twice the vocabulary of French, because of its double Latin and Teutonic roots. Powell made use of that too: contrary to expectation, words that would normally be regarded as recondite, mostly of Latin origin, are more frequent in *A Dance* than in *A la recherche*.

What Powell took most importantly from Proust was the reflective generalisation as an integral thread in the narrative. In his use of this, Proust was drawing on his own 17th-century literary resources, the maxims of the French moralists. *A la recherche* would be unimaginable without it, the title of the novel itself a promise of research to a generalisable end. But, as noted above, intellectually speaking Proust's *obiter dicta* are too often weakened by monomania and inflation; they lack the ironic precision and control of La Rochefoucauld or La Bruyère.5 Far more observant about others, Powell was his superior in handling fictional generalisations about them. Flowing seamlessly through the plot, and delivered by the narrator, defining his personality, they are consistently finer-grained, and typically more striking.

They also cover a much wider span of objects. Modes: ‘fashions of one generation, moral or physical, are scarcely at all assessable in terms of another. They cannot properly be equated.’ Setbacks: a ‘law that requires most people to minimise to a superior a misfortune which, to an inferior, they would magnify’. Appearances: ‘Persons at odds with their surroundings will not infrequently suggest an earlier historical epoch.’ Rebels: ‘Nothing dates people more than the standards from which they have chosen to react.’ Digs: ‘that streak of social cruelty that few lack’. Nuptials: ‘Weddings are notoriously depressing affairs.’ Sexual success: ‘Seduction is to do and say, the banal thing in the banal way.’ Some of these are no more than high-spirited quips, others apothegms that go deeper.

Bearing directly on its themes, and moving at a level well above them, are longer reflections. Extracted from the narrative contexts that give each its particular analytic force, they inevitably lose something of their flavour, but are indicative enough. Alterity: ‘It is not easy – perhaps not even desirable – to judge other people by a constant standard. Conduct obnoxious, even unbearable in one person, may be readily tolerated in another: apparently indispensable principles of behaviour are in practice relaxed – not always with impunity – in the interests of those whose nature seems to demand an exceptional measure.’ The second parenthesis, qualifying without cancelling the conclusion, is characteristic. Unpredictability: ‘Human relationships flourish and decay, quickly and silently, so that those concerned scarcely know how brittle, or how inflexible, the ties that bind them have become.’ Egoism: ‘Self-interest, equally unattractive in outer guise and inner essence, is, all the same, a necessity for individual survival. It should not perhaps be too much despised, if only for that reason. Despised or not, its activities are rarely far from the surface. Now at Widmerpool’s words about leaving, I was unwelcomely aware of self-interested anxieties throbbing hurriedly into operation.’ Love: ‘Although not always simultaneous in taking effect, nor necessarily at all equal in voltage, the process of love is rarely unilateral. When the moment comes, a secret attachment is often returned with interest. Some know this by instinct; others learn in a hard school.’ Generalisations spurning absolutes, each with its reservation or proviso: ‘most’ – ‘perhaps’ – ‘not infrequently’ – ‘few’ – ‘rarely’ – ‘at all’ – ‘not always’ – ‘scarcely’ – ‘all the same’ – ‘not without impunity’. Overturned, one Proustian sententia after another.